

Leveling up 701

Chapter 701: Unlimited Power

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

A hundred of instances proved useless against the new attack. While the armadil shield protected Dallion from the raw force of the wave, it didnt come without its consequences. It had been quite a while before Dallion had received damage from being crashed to the ground. It was a harsh reminder that in this field, at least, Dallions overconfidence wasnt merited. While he could use every trick he had learned so far to find a shortcut or two, or even win against some novices or an inexperienced apprentice, he remained a novice.

Harp and Nil had often told him that brute strength used without understanding was only likely to succeed by luck. Using spark attacks granted some freedom, but they were the equivalent of a scalpel. Using them to pierce armor was not only impossible, but outright stupid. True, with enough scalpels, pretty much everything became possible, and that was largely how Dallion had used his ability so far. Coming to that realization, one can only be relieved that the Star never got access to such power. If he had managed to capture Aether and obtained the spellcraft skill gem, Dallion would never have stood a chance.

Water dripped into the metal sphere. The shield, despite all his benefits, was unable to stop the liquid. There was a high chance that it had magic qualities as well.

Its just water, Harp said.

Dallion nodded.

Shield, open up, he said.

Are you sure? The dryad guardian asked.

I can hold my breath.

Thats not what I'm worried about

As the shield contracted, water poured in. Dallion was expecting to find himself underwater, but it only reached his knees. The bigger issue, as the shield had said, was the whales. Despite their massive size, several of them had managed to cluster together, eager to have a bite at him.

It was curious how they could see him. Either their perception was high, or they were using other means. The scales of several of them flickered.

This time Dallion didnt wait for the spell to be complete.

Lux, lift me up! he ordered. And right on time.

No sooner had he shot up than several more wave spells came into effect, flooding the whole area with water. What was more interesting was that the scarabisks surrounding it moved close together, creating a wall of combined magic spheres that allowed the water to gather up like in a fishbowl.

This was no random event. A higher mind was at work, or at the very least a conglomerate of creatures with the sole aim of getting Dallion to lose the challenge. Still, for some reason, none of the creatures seemed to attack the group outside.

Splitting into instances, Dallion looked around. Half of the whales were slowly moving his direction with the rest remaining close to the central obelisk. Right now, that also proved to be the single remaining structure, everything else having dissolved into stone insects.

A fair distance away, Raven and the rest were just standing there, observing events with interest. No doubt their echoes were exchanging notes on the matter, discussing approaches on how to deal with what Dallion was currently facing.

Dallion aimed at the eye of the nearest whale, then threw his harpsisword at it. His secret hope was that Harp would step in, giving him a hand in the matter. Alas for him, the weapon simply bounced off the transparent eyelid, falling down into the water. This time, he was on his own.

Think, Dallion told himself.

Remaining perfectly calm, his fingers moved about, drawing the symbols of a fireball. The object instantly appeared a sphere of flames that dropped straight down. On its way, though, it managed to hit one of the flying creatures.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased 200%

The giant being twitched, pulling away way faster than Dallion expected it to move. Fire, apparently, hurt them. Rather, it was the magic of the fire that did the trick. One small spell had, in effect, done more damage than several line attacks ever could. The issue was that Dallion wasn't able to control fireballs to a large degree. Then again, maybe he didn't have to.

Lux, get me to the wounded one, he said. Match its speed and keep me near the wound.

You got it, boss! The firebird sounded all too eager to oblige. Thrusting Dallion up, then down, it then flew after the escaping whale, reaching it in a matter of seconds.

Flying around the whale in spiral fashion, Lux went to the area that had been affected by the fireball. One look was enough to make it clear that everything was made to be a trial. There was no way that the simple spell he had cast would cause as much devastation as a volley of cannon balls.

Nil, can I enter realms while here? Dallion asked.

That's a tricky one. Normally, you shouldn't be able to. But since this is the domain of Galatea, who knows? Personally, I would recommend against

Before he could finish, Dallion made an attempt to enter his own awakening realm. There was no result. More precisely, the results were unlike anything he had experienced before. For a moment, he almost saw the green outlines of a textless rectangle. As he tried to move through it, though, he found himself unable to do so. It was as if he were trying to fly through a very thin layer of plastic.

He could almost get a glimpse of his realm from above. The whole experience lasted for a fraction of a second, effectively leaving Dallion where he was.

it, Nil completed his sentence. You never know what might happen.

Got it, Dallion replied.

That was a shame. It would have been nice to cast a rocket, same as he had against the chainling. On the other hand, there was no reason he couldn't replicate the effects.

Wasting no time, Dallion cast a spell summoning a dartbow bolt. He had learned that spell early on, since it would prove quite useful in standard combat as well. Normally, he'd just summon the bladebow as well; right now, doing so would leave him falling into the water below. Instead of that, he hastily drew a series of speed symbols on the arrow itself. This was one of the more tricky things: the faster the arrow became, the tighter he had to hold it since even the slightest motion of his hand made the arrow want to slide out and fly off.

After the seventh speed symbol, Dallion felt that was the limit. Sweat covering his face, he drew a heat symbol on the tip, then quickly threw it at the wounded spot of the whale before his fingers got burned.

The arrow darted forward faster than the human eye, creating a small explosion as it went into the creature.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased 500%

The damage was significant, as Dallion expected, causing the whale to lose strength and fall into the water with a great splash.

Good show, dear boy! Nil cheered. A bit more and you could have killed it.

No, Dallion said. It's better this way.

You don't seriously think you could have a conversation with that creature?

Nope. Lux, let me go.

Confusion swept through the firebird, briefly causing its flames to gain a green tint. However, it did jump off Dallion; it had learned to know when he was serious about something.

Here goes nothing. Dallion took a deep breath.

Orange markers appeared in the air, guiding him how to adjust his body so as to enter the water in the best way possible. Without argument, the entry was so smooth that it would make Olympians jealous. It was at that point that Dallion finally got to see the white rectangle of the whale for the first time.

REALM CREATURE

Species: AETHER WHALE

Class: MAGIC

Health: 10%

Traits:

- **BODY: 20**
- **MIND: 20**
- **REACTION: 10**
- **PERCEPTION: 10**
- **MAGIC: 60**

Skills

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **UNIVERSAL SWIM (Species Unique)**
- **AETHER SCALES (Species Unique)**

Weakness: INNARDS

So, youre hiding your information now? Dallion thought.

That was quite a useful spell, especially for mages who had the ability to see the white rectangles of others in real life. It was only now that Dallion realized that nearly all of the people hed seen the skills and stats of were novices. Even the adequate apprentices had clearly learned how to shield themselves from prying eyessomething Dallion had better learn how to do as well.

While useful, the information wasnt Dallions main goal, though. Swimming on, he made his way to an open part of the whales wound. The flesh appeared to have erupted into clusters of threads that were waving about in the water.

Getting near, Dallion grabbed hold of the brightest magic thread with both hands and pulled.

There was a lot of things that could be said about trying to steal magic from a fatally wounded monster. The only thing that came to Dallions mind was that it was nothing like his experience with the icicorn. The strength of the initial force that went through him was so strong, it almost knocked Dallion dozens of feet back. To make things even more challenging, the thread was as slippery as could be. Whoever had come up with the expression greased lightning must have been to this world at some point.

Swimming forward with all his strength, Dallion refused to let go of the thread, gripping at it as if his life depended on it.

The water vibrated as several more waves slammed into it from above in their attempt to help the wounded creature. The reasonable thing to do was to leave the thread and run. Stubbornly, Dallion didnt. Not only that, but he stopped using combat splitting, focusing on consuming part of the whales magic.

Then, finally, the thread broke loose.

For a single second, Dallion felt as if hed found himself in the center of a purple sun. The sensation was warm and overwhelming, but also enlightening.

You have assimilated part of the AETHER WHALEs magic, increasing your magic trait to 18.

The bright light faded away, bringing Dallion back to where he was a moment ago. The only difference was that this time, he was no longer holding anything.

Just part? He wondered, glancing at the creatures open wound. There were more magic threads there. Maybe he could risk getting another? The temptation was almost impossible to resist. There was no telling when hed get another chance

Magic symbols light up, forming in some of the whales surviving scales.

Instinct took over. Dallions fingers moved on their own, copying the barrier spell he had seen Cheska cast. All difficulties in the past seemed to have been washed away, as Dallion completed it instantly, casting a protective bubble around him. Not only that, but the spell also pushed out all the water, leaving Dallion within a magic sphere of air.

How did you do that? Nil asked, beyond impressed.

I have no idea, Dallion whispered as he watched the rest of the water in the immediate vicinity be drawn up like a waterrise.

Separating into blobs the size of his head, the water shot up, taking Dallions bubble with it. One second he was in the water, the next, he found himself hundreds of feet in the air. Waterdrops the size of basketballs crashed into the bottom of the magic sphere with lethal consistency. It didnt take long for it to shatter, but by then Dallion had already gone into a spellcasting frenzy, casting any spell he could think of.

Iksas projectile spell was copied, as were Cheskas chains and Ravens anti-magic lightning spell.

Stop casting! Nil shouted from Dallions realm. Hold your magic, now!

The voice sounded sort of distant, as if heard through a dream. It made Dallion pause a slight bit, looking at nowhere in particular, but he didnt stop.

If you run out of magic here, there wont be a way to restore it!

Lux flew into Dallion, enveloping him with his flame, but even that wasnt enough to get him back to his senses.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

HAND SEVERED

You will no longer be able to make use of your RIGHT HAND

The casting stopped immediately.

Dallion looked down. Ruby was fluttering ten inches from him, right above where his hand used to be.

Chapter 702: Gleam from the Past

The sensation of omnipotence vanished, bringing Dallion back to reality. Confusion quickly followed; confusion as to what he was doing, why the magic had faded, and why Ruby had sliced his hand off. Looking at the small creature, it was easy to forget that shardflies were actually rather deadly creatures of the wilderness. So far, he had never had a reason to harm Dallion, but that didn't mean he should be taken lightly.

Why? Dallion asked, still coming down from the buzz of the magic surge.

There was no need for an answer. Part of Dallion realized that was the only way to get him to stop wasting his magic. A bit more and he'd have exhausted himself to the point that he'd be useless at best and magicless at worst.

Dallion looked at his hand. There was no blood there, just a clean line at the end on his wrist, as if someone had erased the rest of his hand with an eraser. The wound wouldn't cause any permanent damage outside of the Moon's realm. Unfortunately, it also reduced his efficiency in half.

You needed it, Ruby replied, then flew back onto Dallion's shoulder.

The response was so typical of the shardfly that Dallion almost wanted to laugh. He almost would have, if it wasn't for the tricky situation he was in.

His spells had caused several aether whales to fall to the ground. The scales of many were casting healing spells, but it would be a long while before they could be adequately functional again. Ravens' spell had quite a punch, especially against magical creatures. Yet if there was one thing that nature abhorred, even in magic realms, it was a vacuum. With most of the whales away from the obelisk gone, the scarabesks had broken ranks, pouring in to fill the gap.

Between them and the remaining whales, Dallion had no chance. Every fiber in his being screamed for him to get the heck out of here, and for once, he listened.

Lux, get me somewhere safe.

With a chirp, the firebird flew up, going for the only unprotected direction in the air. The aether whales didn't even make an attempt to follow, but the scarabisks noticeably changed direction.

What are you doing? Dallion heard Ravens' voice, amplified several times with a spell.

Getting out of here, Dallion replied after casting a similar amplification spell with his left hand. What does it look like?

You can't quit now! Now when we're so close!

Did you get a good look? There are probably millions of insects aiming to kill me, and once they do, they'll come after you. Your best chance is to take advantage of this and try to get to the obelisk. With the four of you, maybe you'll stand a chance.

You're the one who's supposed to trigger the obelisk! Not us!

Was that the plan all along, or was Raven making things up? According to his original plan, they were supposed to bypass the obelisks altogether. If that were the case, what he was saying now was utter crap.

Quite possibly the black-haired came to the same conclusion, for shortly after, Dallion spotted another guardian spirit fly past him, making the connecting point to the banished realm. The rest of the group seemed to have given up as well, choosing to go back to their original plan. Dallion was even inclined to let them, when Ruby suddenly flew off without warning.

Ruby! Dallion shouted. Whats gotten into you?

Shes there! The shardfly said. I felt her.

There was no need to ask who he was referring to. There was only one being which Ruby revered to such an extent Glean.

Are you sure?

Shes just beyond the realm.

Back on Earth, that would have sounded incredibly profound or cheesy. Ruby had none of those qualities. A jolt of emotion passed through Dallion. Could there be a way to get Glean back? Aether had offered as much when asking Dallion to set him free, not to mention that Dallion had spoken with Glean just before making the deal. Maybe there was a real possibility.

Using his left hand, Dallion cast two voice amplification spells.

Aetherfish, I need you for a favor! he shouted.

The very next moment, the large jellyfish popped up a few feet away from him.

Distract the insects for a bit, Dallion said. Ill try not to take long, but I cant be sure.

Distract them? The creature asked.

You dont have to kill or fight them, just keep them occupied. Can you do that?

Sure. I can do that.

Magic symbols emerged within the jellyfish. Once the spell was complete, the entire creature popped into thousands of smaller jellyfish, each the size of a thumb. Definitely an innovative approach, but Dallion didnt have time to admire it. Directing Lux to Ruby, Dallion drew several speed symbols on the shardfly mid-flight. Barely had he finished when Ruby zipped into the distance.

Follow him, Dallion whispered to Lux.

For close to five seconds the shardfly changed directions, like an eighties Earth arcade machine. Then he stopped.

Here, he said, wings fluttering like a hummingbird.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Dallion took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Concentrating, he tried to remember the spell Iksa had used to create a portal opening. If he had only known a minute earlier, he could have done it. Now all that endless power had gone, along with most of the knowledge. He still knew the basics—the way he had cast the spells, the symbols involved, and the overall shape of the pattern. However, remembering how to do it in practice was as difficult as pulling teeth from a stone.

Eyes still closed, Dallion moved his fingers. Symbols emerged, connecting together along a multi-circle frame. Each symbol was drawn individually, using only as much magic as needed. Halfway through, Dallion opened his eyes. It was all execution now. His fingers seemed to figure out their own way; all the training in class and in his personal realm had paid off, creating a sort of muscle memory. Only the unknown symbols needed concentration.

It was slow and definitely not easy, but ultimately, the spell was cast. A tear formed in the air, quickly growing into a portal.

That's it, Dallion thought, relaxing.

Ruby eagerly fluttered to enter the banished realm. The moment he got close, the portal increased tenfold. Dallion instinctively split into instances, ready for whatever monster might emerge. As it turned out, the monster was one he knew well.

I knew only you'd be crazy enough to try to come here, Gleam said.

There was no doubt it was her, but the shardfly seemed different: large to the point that she covered the entire portal, preventing anything behind from being seen. Thousands of intricate patterns decorated her eight wings, each glowing with an endless amount of miniature magic threads. It was as if pieces of light had been captured and given color to create the creature.

You seem well, she said. A bit younger, though.

You're different.

This is what I actually am. The peak of my strength—the level I reached before being captured. If I had this much power when facing that water worm, I'd have torn his wings off.

The water work in question was the spectral shardfly that had shattered Dallion's unbreakable whip blade, effectively banishing her into the realm she was currently in.

Hey, Ruby. Good to see you too.

The ruby shardfly kept on trying to cross into her realm, but it seemed something was preventing him. Looking at it, was like watching a butterfly fly against the wind.

No, you can't enter. Only he can.

Me? Dallion blinked.

You have the Moon's magic. Only you can open the portal to the banished and step through. It won't do you any good. You'll die the moment you get here. There's an almost infinite number of beings in here, many stronger than me, and quite a lot that will enjoy nothing less than killing an otherworlder.

Ruby stopped trying to continue, but still didn't move back.

Can you cross over? Dallion asked.

Naturally. Not now, though, not this way. You need to reforge the whip-blade, but you cant use standard forging.

Enchantments?

I cant tell you the details. You;ll need to study a bit to find the right way. But, hey, at least youre in the right place for that. Gleam flapped half of her wings. If you manage to survive this. How did you get them so riled up?

Practicing, I guess.

You really never change. And how are you doing, Lux?

Hey, big sis! The firebird chirped, remaining in the form of a thin layer of flame around Dallion. Missed you.

Always the same goofy ball of energy. And wheres Nox?

Sleeping, Dallion replied. Magic realms dont do well with him.

I could have changed that if I were here.

Flashes of magic light came from the nearby distance. Looking behind, Dallion saw that the aetherfish swarm had engaged the first of the approaching scarabisks. Just as Dallion had told him, the aetherish wasnt aiming to kill or harm the insects, just fly casting dazzling spells. The Scarabisks had caught on, casting spells of their own to kill off the jellyfish swarm.

Youre in a lot of trouble, Gleam shared.

I know. Felygn told me.

I mean right now. In a few minutes, the insects will have you surrounded and its all downhill from there. There was a momentary pause. Unless I help.

Didnt you say that its against the rules? Dallion moved closer. He could feel the invisible barrier separating them, but also felt that he could pass through if he wanted to.

Magic changes the rules. I can help you without crossing over.

Dallion concentrated on his former familiar. As much as he tried, he was unable to see her information rectangle.

You know magic, he said.

Illusion is magic. You should know this by now.

Dozens of magic circles appeared in the air. To the untrained eye it would seem as if they were appearing out of nowhere, but Dallion could see the minuscule threads that created them, flowing from the wings in the form of dust.

Within seconds, large circle-like portals gained form, all of them looking into the void.

Better move aside, Gleam said. This will get messy.

Lux moved Dallion to the side without even receiving an order. Then, the spectacle began. Crystal shards the size of swords poured out of three of the portals, darting through the air in the direction of targets. A dozen more portals followed, releasing hailstones the size of human fists.

Even in the banished realm, she still shows off, Nil grumbled. She's too much like March.

An aether shard the size of a lance flew out of flew out, speeding determinedly at the nearest aether whale. The scales of the creature shimmered in a futile attempt to create a barrier that would save it. The aether shard not only shattered the barriers, but broke through the scales and emerged on the other side, impaling the unfortunate creature.

There was nothing that could be said. Dallion never expected Gleam to have been so powerful. If anything, while she was his familiar, she had been downplaying what she was capable of. Using pure magic alone, she was capable of destroying cities. Back in the day, maybe she had.

Vihrogon, how do you fight something like that? Dallion asked the armadil shield.

Oh, that's simple, the dryad guardian said. You send an even bigger monster after it, and trust me, back in the day, there were many monsters. Even I've been called that many times.

Suffering increasing losses, the scarabisks shifted strategy, grouping together and creating a multi-shield barrier behind which the rest gathered while flying in the direction of Dallion. One direct hit and the fire layers of magic barriers were gone. Shards and hail poured on, covering the entire area with rocks and the stone remains of scarabisks.

Suddenly, the attack stopped just as abruptly as it began.

That's the limit of what I'm allowed, Gleam said. Good luck, Dal, and I hope to see you again soon.

All spells cast by the spectral shardfly faded away. The portal to the banished realm began shrinking. Ruby made one final desperate attempt to break through, but was yet again unsuccessful.

Ruby, don't be like that. This won't be the last time.

The portal closed and with it, the tear in reality.

Chapter 703: Purple Moonstone

Don't be sad, little guy, Dallion said. We'll see her again.

The reassurance failed to remove the blob of sadness that had filled Ruby's body. The shardfly kept on fluttering close to the space where the portal had been, as if hoping that it would open again, or maybe even silently urging Dallion to cast the opening spell again.

Any other day Dallion would have sympathized and let him be. Right now wasn't that time. Despite the devastation Gleam had caused to the creatures in the realm, there were still more than enough of them to make things difficult.

Raven and the rest of the group below had gone on the offensive. The aether whales and scarabisks had reacted by grouping round the obelisk for their last stand. Everyone on all sides knew that this was past the point of no return. There was no point in strategizing or hiding powers anymore. The side that would win was the one that gave it all it had.

Mega spell circles quickly appeared. Raven, Cheska, and Iksa combined their efforts to compose something that was well beyond novice level. Dallion was too far away to make out the separate symbols, but he knew that a complex chain of three seven-circle patterns was no joking matter. Meanwhile, the other side cast a series of spells of their own. What they couldn't achieve through complexity, they made up for in quantity. Waves of water poured out from the whales while the insects charged it with electric bolts.

Lets go, Ruby, Dallion said firmly. Time to finish this.

The shardfly didn't react immediately, but a few seconds later turned around, returning to Dallion's shoulder again.

What do you say we finish it in style? Dallion asked, then cast his copy spell on the creature.

You won't be able to do much with a few shardflies, Nil said.

Are you sure? Dallion smiled.

Dozens became hundreds, then thousands. Each shardfly copy was barely a bit stronger than an echo, but the enemies didn't know that; rather, they couldn't risk assuming that.

No sooner had the waves of shardflies swooped down in the direction of the crystal obelisk, than several hundred scarabisks broke off from the overall defense and flew up to meet them. Magic barriers were cast and almost instantly shattered by thousands of wind slashes that fell upon them.

Create a cone! Dallion shouted as he positioned himself behind. All he needed was a hole through the scarabisk defenses. That would stir things up, causing the whales the greatest remaining obstacle to decide whether to focus on Dallion or his group.

Small clouds of jellyfish formed in the air. The aetherfish had caught sight of Dallion's spell and decided to use it on its own accord. It was impossible to tell whether he was doing that for support or just out of a desire for fun, but either way, it helped create the illusion that Dallion was attacking with a well-established plan and a massive army.

Unfortunately, the illusion worked too well. As the waves of shardflies and scarabisks crashed into one another, the whales made a choice that no one expected. Instead of focusing their attention on one single group of attackers, they merged together, enveloping the entire obelisk. The changes didn't end there. Threads of light riddled the new formless whole, tightening and stretching parts until a general form began to take shape. The top of the blob extended, turning into a large neck. Limbs appeared on four sides. It all seemed fascinating until two massive scaly wings popped out, stretching out as much as the constraints would allow them. At that point, icy chills ran through Dallion.

A dragon? He thought. They merged into an aether dragon?

Aether is a versatile material, Nil said. It's not particularly difficult to give it any form, more or less.

It wasn't the form that Dallion was worried about. He had already seen that even small creatures could defeat far larger ones based on the spells they cast and the speed at which they did it. What

terrified him was his opponents reasoning. The only purpose such a transformation could have was to use aspects of the dragon that weren't related to magic.

In the blink of the eye, the massive dragon split into instances. Fifty of them flew in the direction of Dallion, while the same amount darted towards Raven and the rest. There was no sign of the obelisk. The spot in which it stood had left nothing but a large hole.

Dal. Ravens voice reached Dallion. It was different from before, sounding like a whisper despite the distance and spell amplification. Give me an opening and I'll take care of the rest.

Against a dragon? Dallion asked. He'd only faced one and a half so far, the half being a dragon's shadow. This one seemed many times more powerful than both of them combined.

Just give me the opening. I'll take care of the rest.

The request was clear. Raven was smart enough to ask it in such a way so as not to raise suspicion. That was good; it meant that the echoes inside the noble's head had a plan. It also meant that they'd only have one shot at this.

I'll do my best! Dallion shouted. Lux, get us away fast!

The flaming wings doubled in size, taking Dallion away at great speed. The dragon instances didn't seem the least impressed, for they sped up as well, not only matching, but surpassing it. It was painfully obvious that the creature surpassed Dallion in every aspect. Magic symbols providing speed, strength, and dozens of other things were glowing all over its body.

Head towards Raven! Dallion ordered.

The firebird abruptly changed course, making Dallion want to throw up. The action halved the distance between Dallion and the remaining dragon instances. Within seconds, they would have reached him.

Come on, Raven! Dallion thought.

Precisely then, the black-haired man made his move. A hundred feet before the dragon instances were upon him, Raven split into ten instances, each casting a flight spell that took him in a different direction. It looked like a clumsy attempt to escape the inevitable. By the time the aether dragon had reached him, Ravens instances had barely moved a dozen feet away from his original spot.

Got you! Dallion thought.

From his perspective, time froze. A dozen dragon instances were less than a hundred feet away, just about to catch up to him. Meanwhile, one of the instances was smack in the middle of Ravens own. Anyone would call the situation hopeless and everyone would be wrong. There was one thing that Dallion could do to reverse the situation: forced splitting.

Concentrating as much as he could, he selected one instance for the dragon and another for Raven. No one else, including himself, was going through any splitting at that precise moment of time. Dallion expected to feel a reality tug coming from the massive creature, but there was none. The dragon had been caught completely off guard and incapable of reacting. All instances, except for one, faded away. Appropriately, Ravens remaining instance was precisely in the best situation to take advantage of the situation.

The boys left hand reached into the air, where a weapon appeared. Compared to the monster, it was so small that one couldnt even call it a toothpick. Nonetheless, the black-haired struck the dragon, piercing one of the thick scales that covered it.

A high-pitched sound filled the air, similar to an industrial dog whistle. Magic threads were sucked into the sword at tremendous speed. In a single instant, the indestructible dragon was rendered powerless, becoming little more than a massive doll. The wings flapped in a desperate attempt to pull away from Raven and his weapon, but in vain. The powers that compelled it to enter the sword were far too great.

That weapon, Nil said.

I know. Dallion remained a mile away, keeping his distance. It was the same artifact that hed been asked to clear at the magic shop. That explained why hed bumped into Raven outside of the Learning Hall. Clearly, someone had finished the job transforming the artifact into the terrifying weapon it was. In normal circumstances, defeating the dragon would have ranged between impossible and extremely difficult. The weapon had changed all that with one strike.

Everyone watched as the dragon kept unraveling until it vanished completely in a matter of seconds. The obelisk, no longer finding any support in the air, fell down, hitting the ground with a loud thump. The sound virtually marked the end of the trial, but for some reason Dallion didnt feel like celebrating. Knowing that yet another ominous weapon was in the hands of a noble was more than enough to sour his day.

We did it! Cheska shouted, oblivious to the potential danger. Good one, Raven! Serves them right.

Dallion waited for Dallion to unsummon the weapon, then flew down to join the rest. They were cheering each other like children, making the situation even more scary. A high-noblemans child with a sword that destroys magic What could possibly go wrong?

You did quite well, too. Raven turned to Dallion. I didnt think your splitting was so good.

We were lucky that the dragon wasnt ready.

Lucky or not, we did it! Cheska said, shoving Dallion in the arm with her elbow. No one has tried this challenge in centuries and we did it!

Were not there yet, Iksa said in a slightly more sober tone.

We have so. Cheska crossed her arms. Everything else is just going through the motions.

Everything else? Dallion asked.

The final challenge. Raven started his way towards the fallen obelisk. Weve completed the realms challenges, but thats not all. Theres always one final step.

Dallion thought about it for a minute.

An exit guardian. He shook his head. It was obvious when thinking about it, also very sneaky. Just when the novices believed they had succeeded, after the most exhausting battle the realm offered,

theyd have to face something else. Knowing the Moons, that guardian would likely be a lot stronger than the first.

Looking at the rest of the group, it was obvious they were not fit for that. All of them were exhausted. Cheska had even drawn a few endurance symbols on herself to keep from falling over. The only two people who could be considered in fit condition were Dallion and Phoil and Phoil hadnt shown to be of any use so far.

Whats the plan? Dallion looked at Raven. You use the sword to kill it?

That might be tricky. Besides, theres an easier way. Phoils a sacrifice.

Dallion stared at the large boy.

Why did you think they took me along? Phoil grinned. When could I get as good as you and Cheska?

To some degree Dallion had a suspicion that Raven was saving Phoil for something. However, he assumed that the boy had some innate skill that couldnt be used frequently. In a manner of speaking, that was true. Out of everyone, Dallion would have thought hed be the most likely to be sacrificed. The fact that he wasnt suggested there was more required to it.

Youre giving up the Moonstone? Dallion asked.

Says who? We get that when we leave the realm. The guardian wont kill me, hell just eject me from the realm. Yeah, Ill get a level penalty, but Ill still keep the tone.

That didnt sound particularly reassuring. Dallion considered his options. In all likelihood, he could take the entire group without trouble. That would defeat the purpose, though. Besides, if what Raven was saying turned out to be true, Dallion couldnt defeat the exit guardian.

Without a word, he went to the obelisk and put his hand on the crystal surface. Nothing happened.

Back to riddles again, Dallion thought.

Splitting into ten instances, Dallion drew different symbols. He started with the one for light. As it turned you, that was the right one. The entire obelisk lit up. A beam of purple light shot out from its tip, creating a circular tear in reality a short distance away.

A loud cracking sound came from the obelisk. Dallion split into instances and jumped back, the harpsisword appearing in his left hand. He was expecting a surprise enemy of sorts. Instead, he saw that five small chinks of crystal had fallen off the structure.

Thats Moonstone? he asked. Not what I expected.

Cautiously, he picked one up. At that point, he knew there could be no mistake. The energy that circulated through this small piece of crystal was comparable to that of Aether.

Its safe, Dallion said as he examined the Moonstone. It could use some polishing. Ironically, of all the skills, he lacked only that particular one which would help him do that.

One by one, the rest of the group claimed their reward. The reaction was as one would expect even Ravens face lit up. Once more, they seemed like children that had received their first piece of candy. If only life was so simple.

Guess Im up, Phoil said, making his way towards the portal. There was an inhuman eagerness in his demeanor. See you on the other side.

A moment later, he was gone. Now all everyone else could do was wait.

Chapter 704: New Companions and Old

Seconds turned to minutes. Initially, everyone gathered round the portal tear, eagerly waiting for something to happen. After a few minutes, interest began to wane. By the tenth minute, only Raven remained, everyone else directing their attention on the fallen obelisk. After another five minutes, the black-haired joined them.

Everything okay? Dallion asked.

This isnt an exact art, the other replied. Well know when he succeeds, or fails.

How exactly?

If he fails, his echo will disappear, making it obvious. If he succeeds, well get a

YOU HAVE DEFEATED THE EXIT GUARDIAN

YOU ARE ALLOWED TO PROCEED OUT OF GALATEAS REALM

A pair of purple rectangles popped up in the air.

That. Raven pointed.

Was about time, Cheska grumbled. Leave it to Phoil to nearly mess things up. Lets go.

Without waiting for anyone, she went straight to the tear, then stepped through. Dallion hesitated a bit. As far as he knew, there was no such thing as fake rectangles, but there was no reason there couldnt be. With the magic realm being a realm of exceptions, it was just like the Purple Moon to play one last trick.

Youre overthinking things again, Nil said. Just accept your victory and move on.

Ive never heard it put like that before, Dallion thought, then followed the rest of his group through.

Reality shifted, though not to the real world. Dallion suddenly found himself in a wide purple room. There was only one thing there, and it was Galatea in his nymph form.

Galatea Sweat formed on Dallions forehead.

I wont punish you further, the Moon said, his words soaked with annoyance. Youve done a pretty good job of that yourself. In fact, Im here to reward you.

Me? Dallion blinked. I thought that

I didnt like you? the Moon finished the question. I dont particularly. Some of the rest find you amusing. Felygn things youll still find the way, the rest tolerate you. But you did pass the trial.

So, this is happening to everyone. Dallion let out a mental sigh of relief.

Not quite. They did the minimally necessary to get their stones, and they got just that. The sacrifice will lose a level, of course, but he knew that when he signed up to this plan. I would like to say that

it was amusing to watch, but it would be a lie. It was so boring, like watching a paint-by-numbers artist. I was almost hoping theyd try to enter the banished realms. Now, that would have been amusing. He let out a chuckle that sent shivers down Dallions spine.

The Moon leaned back, sitting into a large throne-like chair that appeared. There was no sign of symbols, no indication of spellcrafting, just the vaguest of sensations that magic had been involved.

Were you happy to see your familiar? Galatea asked.

Gleam, Dallion thought. Yes, he quickly added. Thank you for allowing it.

So, you can be smart and polite when you want to be? The purple-clad nymph leaned forward. Youre hoping that Ill allow you to have her return? Alas, for you, thats beyond a novice trial. When I designed this, it was for children starting out in magic, and there was a time all this was seen as a childish game. An entry level tutorial to put in your terms. Things have changed a lot since then.

That was an understatement. Even from the partial memory fragment Dallion had glimpsed within Aether, he remembered the glory of the past age. Back then, nearly everyone had some degree of magic. Those that didnt have devices that allowed them to; that was the Stars greatest gift, her greatest temptation and her greatest pride that had led to the collapse of an era.

Youre still thinking about that? the aetherbird flashed into existence on the Moons shoulder. If I knew Id made such a big impression, I wouldnt have been such a jerk to you. Not that you werent one! All that stubbornness and in the end you still did what you refused all that time.

Instinctively, Dallion took a step back.

I said Im here to reward you, the Moons voice hardened. You could have killed the aetherfish, but you didnt.

Most usually do. The aetherbird stretched his wings.

Simultaneously, Lux returned to his flame form, perching on Dallions shoulder. Even without looking, it was obvious that the species were alike, looking at each other in a combination of admiration and rivalry. In a different reality, Dallion could almost imagine them going out to the equivalent of a pub for drinks and arguments.

Some even theorize thats why the creatures were createdeasy target practice so that novices could explore their spells.

Theyre still creatures. The words felt almost fake. A single act could hardly erase what Dallion had done before.

Wont Felygn be happy, the Moon scoffed. Since you passed that section of the trial in another way, heres your personal reward.

Galatea reached out. A small aetherfish appeared in the palm of his hand, slowly rising in the air.

COMPANION - AETHERFISH

You have gained a Level 1 companion

Intrigued by your behavior, the aetherfish has established a deep connection and will follow you both in the real world and any awakened world. The aetherfish will guard your awakened room or attack any enemy you command in the awakened realm.

Made entirely of magic, the aetherfish has no physical presence, but is capable of casting spells and boosting your magic by a portion, should that become necessary. The complexity of the spells it casts depends on the aetherfishs level.

A new companion? It seemed like an eternity since Dallion had acquired one. Gleam had been the last back when he was still in Nerosa. Dallion remembered sacrificing part of his personal progression to do that, and had never regretted it since.

There, its done. Dalatea leaned back. You can return to your boring existence.

Wait! Dallion shouted. What about Gleam? How can I get her back?

Before he could finish the question, he was in the real world, standing between the pillars on the towers roof. From everyones expression, it was obvious that from their point of view, not even an instant had passed since the start of the trial. All of a sudden, though, Dallion saw their faces brighten up.

Wonderful to see you succeed. Enroy was the first to speak. Relief was emanating from him to such a degree that Dallion felt as if there was a whistle blowing in his ears. Not that there was much doubt. That was an obvious lie, although well hidden.

Thank you, mage. Raven nodded, holding the Moonstone above his head for everyone to see. It was a childish thing to do, but one appreciated based on the polite clapping it received.

You could have said it was a combined effort, Dallion thought.

Why would he? Nil asked, surprised. Hes the son of a noble. From his point of view, the rest of you are just tools that helped him achieve what he deserved. And you have to admit, he has a point.

The people who put the echoes in his realm were the ones running the show.

Ah, but why did they choose his realm to put their echoes in? Trust me on this, they are hired help like everyone else, just a bit more high-class than what youre usually used to. Even mages have people to answer to.

If this were the Icepicker guild, the success would be celebrated with a large feast. After everything they had been through, the group could well use one. Dallion, in particular, felt his stomach gurgle with hunger. Unfortunately, all that followed were a few half-felt words of congratulation, after which the mages went back to their carriages and flew off. Less than a minute later, the novices were rushed back into their version of a carriage, starting the flight back to the Learning Hall.

The trip was remarkably quiet, though not for entirely different reasons. An unusual energy seemed to be emanating from all of theminuscule magic threads spreading from the Moonstones into them. Back on Earth, that would be considered the prelude to a horror movie. Here, it was an awe-inspiring honor. The only person who didnt feel it was Dallion. Since his magic was already divine in nature, there was nothing that the stone could add more. It just remained there, containing more energy than one could imagine.

So, this is your world? The aetherfish asked from beside Ruby. The shardfly didnt seem to be overly bothered, but stepped slightly away nonetheless. So different.

Youll get a chance to explore it later. Right now, just stay hidden.

What are you going to do with your stones? Dallion asked in an attempt to prevent everyone else from noticing his new companion. The familiar remained nameless, causing the word Gem to pop up in Dallions mind.

Gem? the creature asked. I like it.

Dallion already regretted his choice, but it was too late.

Theyll be useful, Raven replied vaguely. What are your plans?

I dont know. Use it to remove my novice seal?

Thats not how it works, Phoil smirked. He looked quite happy for someone whod just lost a magic level.

Maybe thats what Ill use it for, Dallion snapped back.

Oh, yeah? Be an idiot and waste it on nonsense!

Phoil, Raven said in a warning tone. Its his tone. He could do what he wants with it. Even give it to someone else if thats what he wants.

That quickly made the large boy shut up. Looking away, he took out what was left of the shimmering cards and started shuffling them.

One thing I suggest that you do is keep it somewhere safe. The black-haired turned to Dallion. The entire Academy has heard of what youve done by now. By evening, the empire will know and tomorrow the whole world.

I have something in mind, thanks. Was fun going through this. Thanks for choosing me.

Yes, it was. A faint smile appeared on Ravens face, then quickly disappeared. It also means that our alliance is over. Tomorrow were back to being rivals.

Right. That doesnt mean we cant talk to each other.

The silence suggested that might not be the case. Even so, Dallion felt a spark of longing coming from all of them, even Phoil. At first, he was rather surprised by the fact, but then he remembered; despite all their training and echoes, they remained children, and at that age relationships were quick to form and hard to forget. More than likely, this was the first time theyd been allowed anywhere without direct supervision. It was inevitable they got close, even to those they were with. Of all the novices at the Academy, this group probably contained the most skilled in one form or another. Cheska was no doubt going to become the rising star, and depending on the strength of her character she in a few years shed be quite insufferable. Raven would probably leave the Academy the first chance he got. As for the rest, Dallion had no doubt they would become mages soon enough.

Nil, do you think this would be a good place for Di?

An irregular fury mage? Dear boy, shell be practically worshiped. Of course, that means her secret would be out. Youve experienced the consequences of that firsthand.

Yeah

With backing, shell do well. Whether she appreciates it, thats a different matter entirely.

Are you all hungry?

Everyone stared at Dallion as if he had spontaneously transformed into a toad.

Seriously, its been a rough trial and I could do with a feast. Given what we accomplished, I think wed be allowed some slack for the rest of the day. What do you say we have a final get-together in the dining hall one last time? Just like old times.

It sounded funny, but for a child, a few months seemed like an eternity.

What do you think? Dallion looked raven in the eye.

One last meal together, the black-haired said slowly. Sounds nice. Id like that.

Chapter 705: The War Outside

Graduating high-school was a weird experience. Dallion remembered being a bit bummed out that he might not see his friends, yet at the same time was looking forward to the freedom college life offered. The final meal with raven and the rest felt something like it. Part of him was relieved he wouldnt have to deal with alliance matters, part of him was relieved he wouldnt have less to deal with kids, but at the same time he also felt hed miss the goofs. There was no doubt in his mind that from tomorrow, the echoes that steered the young nobles and prodigies would quickly limit their connection to him until he became nothing more than a distant memory. The problem was that he would still remember.

Maybe its for the best, he said out loud, lying on his bed.

Floating about, Gem was amusing itself, exploring the room and casting minor spells on anything that caught its fancy. Ruby seemed to be a prime subject. At his current level, the shardfly was incapable of causing any harm to the aetherfish. His wings, sharp as razors, would rip through the jellyfish as if it were made of air. After a few attempts, Ruby just gave up and stoically endured the spells cast on him. The latest increased his size five-fold, making him take a quarter of the room.

Seriously, you two? Dallion grumbled.

If that was a level one aetherfish, he dreaded to think of the chaos the familiar would cause when he leveled up.

Gem, dont you have a realm to scour?

Its more interesting out here, the aetherfish replied unapologetically. It was also right. Despite all of Dallions improvements, his realm couldnt compare to the real world, even after placing the Moonstone in it.

The Vermillion ring had worked quite well transporting the stone within Dallion. There was a slightly unexpected moment when it turned out that the size of the stone had vastly increased to the

dimensions of a small house. Dallions echoes and some of the guardians were rather amused. Nil, especially, was very intrigued, spending almost all his time examining the crystal for his personal curiosity.

Just dont go overboard with the spells, okay?

Why?

They arent allowed here.

In the real world?

No, in the room. Although its not a good idea to cast them in the real world without a very good reason.

The comment made Dallion think about life outside the Academy. While he was studying in his small magical bubble, events were unfolding with greater speed, events he had no knowledge of. All rumors about the war had ceased. There wasnt even a mention of what was going on with the civil war in Wetie province, and then there was Euryale. It had been quite a while since the two had been in touch. Dallion would still dream about her a few times per week, but any attempt at communication outside the Academy was strictly forbidden.

Whats happening outside, Nil?He asked.

Do you really want to know? Theres nothing you could do, so the knowledge would serve no practical purpose.

Thats for me to decide.

It will needlessly distract you. Trust me on that, dear boy.

Nil

If you insist Nils disapproval was palpable. The empire has suffered losses. One province is half gone, and it doesnt look like its the end of it. Imperial legions have had to step in. Theres even talk that the emperors personal guard might have to take the field. A bit premature, but the fact that rumors are circulating is concerning in itself.

What about Eury? How is she?

Ah. Well, I assume shes fine. Shes dropped off the map. My original made a few attempts to find her, entirely for your benefit, but so far, hes been unsuccessful. She was on a mission last, seeking out an obscure artifact, but thats all. As always, she refuses to use her echo ring, so its not exactly a surprise.

Eury was on a mission for Adzorg? That didnt come as a complete surprise. The old man had been sending Jiroh on missions before Dallion even woke up in this world. The rational part of his mind tried to rationalize her absence, explaining that missions such as this took time. After all, he himself had been gone for weeks hunting in the wilderness back when they were together. Yet, there was a part of him that made him feel loss, even if it was buried by more immediate concerns.

Shell be fine. Shes been through a lot worse while at a lot lower level.

I know, Dallion said, mostly for his own benefit. And Wetie?

The old echo didnt immediately reply.

Nil? Dallion asked after a few seconds of silence. How bad is it?

Its not good. Countess Priscord is winning. The Archduke has lost half of his support and even now his brothers city is under siege. The way things are going to a showdown is inevitable. The Archduke knows that the more he waits the weaker hell get, so its a matter of weeks before he gathers everyone and goes on an all out war. Theres every chance things get as messy as during the Wars of Succession.

A mini nova of thoughts exploded in Dallions mind. Hundreds of questions popped up and were quickly answered by his internal logic, yet none of the answers were particularly hopeful. An all out war would devastate the province. Many of his friends and acquaintances would be forced to choose a side. Fleeing would be no option any longer. Nerosal, Lanitol, and every other city would become a valid target for attack, even smaller settlements such as Dallions home village. And after the carnage was done, a neighboring country would have every incentive to take over the territory. Normally, the fear of imperial retributions would stop them, but with the Empire on the losing side, things would be different. March, Vend, Spike all of them were already at odds with the countess. Even Hannah and Adzorg might get involved, possibly Di as well.

And the emperor has too many other problems to care, Dallion sighed. Rage filled him. Despite all his power, he felt so helpless. It wasnt merely a matter of leaving the Academy. Even if he did, there was nothing he could actually do. In the end, he remained one man who couldnt even take sides without being outcast by the Academy. There was no way he could stop armies of awakened.

Theres one more thing, Nil said cautiously.

Worse than everything youve told me so far? Dallion let out a laugh, hoping to be contradicted.

A few alliances have cropped up, all aiming to match the empire in strength. The most pressing danger is the Azure Federation composed of seafaring countries that never had any direct contact with the empire. They are the ones conquering territory at present. The echo paused for a few seconds. Recently, a second great power has formed. They havent entered any battles so far, so their actual military power is unknown. They call themselves the Steel and Stone alliancea union of dwarves and gorgons mostly along with a few smaller countries.

Eury? Dallion jumped up.

Theres no proof of that. At this point, there isnt even a rumor that

But you suspect it.

Well, she had been spotted in the general area of the alliance. Mind you, that was back when the alliance didnt even exist, so chances are

Dallion didnt wait for the echo to finish. Using athletic skills, he rushed out of the room. His body instantly shrunk to its child state as he propelled himself to the administration building. The main corridors were crowded as ever, even earning him a few annoyed comments as he navigated through the crowd like a racecar driver.

Within half a minute, he reached the blue building, storming inside.

I need to urgently speak to mage Katka, he all but shouted. On her request.

Everyone stopped whatever they were doing, giving him strange looks. It wasnt the first time a novice had caused a panic. Usually it would be for trivial matters, turning out to be not worth the panic. However, there wasnt an assistant that didnt know who Dallion was. A claim coming from a hunter in his twentieseven in his current appearancewas a different matter and had to be taken seriously.

Its urgent, Dallion stressed, using his magic skills to instill the word in everyones mind.

That wasnt something he was supposed to do, especially here, of all places. However, it had its desired effect. Two separate apprentices cast spells, informing Katka of the urgency. Seconds later, one of them went to Dallion, taking him by the hand back in the corridor along which they continued for several minutes. The pace they were walking at was quite fast, although Dallion felt they were moving with the speed of drunk slugs. After what seemed forever, Dallion was dropped off at another building, where another apprentice took over.

Arent we going to central administration? Dallion asked.

The mage instructed me to take you to her office, the apprentice explained as they went in a new direction.

She has an office? Stood to reason, although Dallion didnt remember her saying she still taught. Even with a memory trait of seventy-nine he wasnt able to remember everything.

After another few minutes they finally arrived. Kaskas office was a small building within the Learning Hall. That much Dallion could expect. What he didnt was that it would have the shape of a miniature castle. It seemed to conform to her delusions of grandeur, although one had to admit that the level of detail was rather impressive. Her claims that she was exceptional in spelling werent empty boasts, it seemed.

Thanks, Eva. Katka emerged from the entrance in a cyan robe. Ill take it from here.

Yes, mage. The apprentice bowed, then quickly rushed off.

Any other day, Dallion would have made a comment about her keeping her apprentices on a short leash. Since he was the one asking the favor, he had to humble himself.

I didnt expect to hear from you this soon, she said with a conniving smile. Definitely not after your glorious success. Enroy was rather smug about it, though dont tell him. His ego is already too big.

I need your help.

Ah. A novice needs my help. What else is new? The mage laughed. I was in the middle of something. Normally I wouldn't even bother, but given our history Katka waited, but Dallion didn't say a word. Fine, I had my fun. What is it?

I want you to teach me spelling.

You brought me here just for that? Anger emanated from the woman. You could have asked any

No, I want you to teach me spelling, Dallion interrupted. Not what's in the library, not what's taught in class not what's accepted in this world.

Katka's expression changed. The anger all but evaporated from her face.

You want the real stuff. Quite the request. It won't be easy or intuitive, but it'll put you on a level above most. Why do you need that?

I need to get out of here, Dallion said. Fast. Knowing that will help me remove my seal.

Why so eager to leave the Academy? This is your safe haven.

Not the Academy. I need to get out of the empire. I need to check something.

The mage's eyes narrowed.

Well. She shrugged. Not my business what you want to do or why. I'll help you out, but it won't be for free.

It never is.

Glad to see that you're learning. Get the bureaucratic stuff sorted with Enroy. I'll teach you evenings, after your other classes are over. You'll need both if you want to get your seal off in months?

Weeks, Dallion corrected.

Weeks. Not impossible, but you'll be in for a wild ride. Is it really worth the rush? You can get there in two or three months without pushing it.

It has to be weeks. And yes, it'll be very worth it.

Chapter 706: Echo Training

A single day was enough to completely transform Dallion's training regimen. If before he was forbidden from joining a vast majority of classes, obtaining the Moonstone granted him access to all of them, even those reserved for prodigies like Cheska. Ironically, the vast choice combined with Katka's lessons forced him to pick only one additional subject: Echo Training. All the other time was spent in the library learning new magic symbols and spell combinations so he could get out of the Academy sooner. Occasionally, he'd spend some time on potion training and enchanting, though those were rather a means to clear his mind after a long day of remembering spells.

Katka's training started a lot more boring than Dallion expected. Rather than jump right to spell principles, she gave him the simple but annoying task to extend his inner magic starting from one hand to the next while stretching both arms sideways. Initially, Dallion thought he had merely to grab his magic and pull it like a rubber band. As he was quickly corrected the room was to do all that with his mind alone: a rather tricky task even for the nymphs' method of casting. On the third day, he finally started making some progress. The miniature threads no longer exploded like clusters

of spaghetti, but obeyed Dallions mental commands twisting around each other to form a small rope of magic.

Finally getting the hang of it? Katka asked. The woman seemed to take great pleasure in Dallions failure, to the point one might think that was the sole reason for her accepting this deal. Did I tell you how I came up with that method?

One of the others told you? Dallion asked. His reaction distracted him slightly, but enough to unravel the few inches of rope he had managed to create.

Those idiots? Katka laughed. Some of them are good, but not in this field. This is entirely my contribution. Even the bitch got to compliment me.

The mage never mentioned any names outright, but Dallion suspected that in this case she might be referring to the woman who had been supporting Gassil. The rogue mages memory fragment hadnt revealed her face, but it didnt sound like there were many females in the group.

Droplets of sweat trickled down his face. Gritting his teeth, Dallion tried to reconstruct the rope, but the effort proved too much. The threads were already starting to go their own directions, rebelling to his commands.

I was bored listening to my instructor, so I decided to play about in my realm. Making symbols had always been a pain, so I decided to do something else just for the sake of it. Thats when I achieved this.

Dallions heart was beating like a drum. The simple exercise had a way of exhausting him to the extreme with his glacial pace of progress. He made one final attempt to maintain control of his threads, then finally pulled them back.

Not even two hours? Katka asked mockingly. Youre really slow.

Wiping the sweat off his face, Dallion sat on the floor to catch his breath.

We have chairs, Katka said.

Dallion didnt respond. At first, he thought she was mocking him. There was only one chair, and she was sitting on it. Then he realized: they were mages they could make chairs. Pushing through the pain, he did just that.

I hear youll be starting echo training tomorrow, the mage said. Curious choice. Whyd you make it? Is it important?

Im doing you a favor, so yes. Her tone hardened. Why did you choose a useless discipline?

There was nothing Dallion could do but comply. While this was far from a favor, Katka could end their deal under any pretext.

The principles will apply on familiars, Dallion said.

Interesting. You have a lot of those. Yeah, I see that being a good one for you. Good choice. Then again, youre from Earth.

So what?

Spellcraft doesn't follow the standard rules. You don't get punished for experimenting here. If anything experimentation is encouraged as long as you bear the consequences of your messes. Were given principles that determine the laws of the universe. Since we're from Earth we've meddled with a lot more so we're not afraid to see how our principles apply. The locals, she let out a disapproving snort, they rely on books. Sure it's great for the initial foundation, but otherwise useless. For example, why don't more people use nymph casting? You've seen the advantage it provides.

Because they don't know any nymphs?

They know you. How many have you asked for tips?

Thinking back, Dallion had to admit she was right. While he had received lots of praise and envy, not a single person had gone as far as to ask him any practical advice.

My trick is similar, Katka said. Think computers. What do you prefer? A standalone powerful one, or one that allows multi-threading.

Dallion winced. Multi-threading? She must have felt really proud when she first thought of applying for that term.

The way you're going it'll take you weeks to be able to use it. When you do, though, you'll see the difference.

And you can't tell me because I have to know it before I can discuss it, Dallion said.

No, Katka laughed. If I tell you, you'll mess it up even more. Anyway, time for you to get back to how the war is going? Dallion interrupted. The truth.

The truth? The mage arched her brows. You've acquired a taste for luxuries already? What have you heard?

The empire's losing the north, and the south is losing itself.

I won't repeat that in the future. But yes, it's about right. It's how this world works. The big form alliances while the small fight on their behalf. An archduke's been messing up more than permissible, but that's what you get with direct succession. Just because someone can become a noble, doesn't mean he's fit for it.

Wasn't the whole point of awakening to determine who's fit and who not?

Nope. If you want philosophy, I can arrange for you to listen to old goats discussing useless topics twenty hours a day and unanimously coming to no conclusions. Awakening gates are meant to stop those who can't handle it. However, there are many ways for someone to cheat. Take you. You were never meant to become a mage, yet here you are.

That's different. I had to fight a Star to get here.

It's always different. Echoes are just helping hands, right? So, what if an archduke's heir gets the echoes of ten thousand skilled mercenaries in his realm? Technically it's still them that did it.

As much as Dallion appreciated the sentiment, he could tell that Katka had no idea what she was talking about. After a certain point echoes no longer mattered. If he had to guess she was still in her

thirties level-wise. Not that it mattered. Her magic trait was a lot higher than that, and that was the only thing that mattered.

Will the Academy get involved?

Honestly, I don't know. I know that talks are ongoing, but Aliens been tightlipped about it. I don't care either way. It wouldn't be the first time we were ordered to destroy an attacker and it won't be the first to sit the whole thing out.

That didn't sound right. Katka was supposed to be old enough to witness the Fury invasion attempt. Either she didn't care or had been safely isolated at the Academy while more experienced mages were taking part in the fight. Alien would definitely know what was going on, but Dallion preferred to stay away from him, at least for the moment.

Are there any exercises that will help me get better at this?

Just sleep, the mage replied. Real sleep, not that fake realm stuff hunters like to do.

That's absurd, Nil commented. As far as magic is concerned, there's no difference whatsoever. Besides it's not like you haven't been getting any since you came here.

Sleep, Dallion repeated. Got it.

Dallion spent several more minutes to be sure he could move his arms, then left Katka's office-house, starting the long walk to his room. No one stopped him along the corridor, even if it was way past the novice curfew time. The achievement had granted him a series of pleasant perks, chief among which the right to walk about at all times of the day and night. Of course, Dallion only used it to go to and from Katka. Nil had advised him not to stir things too much and act as a normal novice, as if that would be possible.

The first, and last thing, Dallion did upon returning to his room was collapse on the bed, clothes still on. Waves of exhaustion kicked. One moment Dallion was telling himself he'd have to kick I up a gear if he wanted to make any progress, the next Gem was pulling his nose in an attempt to wake him up.

What the heck? Dallion burst into instances. Several of them grabbed his harpsisword, a few others picked up the armadil shield, expecting an attack.

Gem? Dallion asked in his unarmed instance. What are you doing?

The mage told me that you need to wake up because you have an important meeting, the aetherfish replied.

It took several seconds for Dallion to decipher the sentence. The mage turned out to be Nil, the meeting was Dallion's class, and the pulling of the nose was Gem's attempt of waking someone up. A lot of effort, but other than that, Dallion would have preferred another hour of sleep. Still, what was done was done. Letting the needless instances fade away, he stretched, did some light exercises, then went to get washed with a chunk of water.

Done, Dallion cast a few minor spells covering his clothes with glamor, then went to the dining hall for breakfast. He was hoping to come across some of the other four of his former alliance, but none of them were present. Instead, he had to deal with pretty much everyone else, who were split between keeping their distance and eagerly wanting to chat.

The cost of popularity, Dallion thought. Now he understood why Cheska behaved the way she did. Being known as unapproachable tended to keep people away. Dallion had gotten relatively calm thanks to Phoel and his antics. Now that was gone, leaving the path open to anyone wanting to become friends with one of the popular kids.

It was very tempting for Dallion to use combat splitting to make his escape, but that was unlikely to be of benefit. Instead, he patiently finished his breakfast, stood up and went to class, where the first surprise of the day awaited him.

Hey, Dal. A fury greeted him in the empty room. Well done with the trial.

Palag? Dallion asked. I thought

Theres been a change. Ill have to take over this class. Since its one of the theoretical subjects I qualify.

Great, Dallion thought. Wheres everyone else?

Its a one week course, the instructor explained. Everyone who wanted to be here has been. Now that youre no longer restricted, you get to experience the joys of academia.

I think it has some practical applications

Oh, I agree, but not everyone is like you. Tell me, how many companions do you have?

Five, Dallion said without thinking. Three, he corrected himself soon after.

Thats a big change.

Ones gone and ones in the real world, Dallion said quickly, wanting to move on from the topic.

The fury must have gotten the hint, for he nodded.

Theres plenty more than most get to experience. Even I have only two.

Two? What are they?

Now, now. The fury laughed. Familiars arent something that should be discussed openly. In your case, though, its inevitable. You make rather good use of them so its natural that people would notice. If you make any more companions, though, Id strongly suggest that you keep them hidden for as long as possible.

Understood.

Alright, so lets get to learning.

The fury drew several spell circles in the air. Once complete an outline of a miniature dragon appeared surrounded on all sides by dozens of purple rectangles.

Chapter 707: Principles of skill granting

It was natural for the dragon to attract the eye. However, that was just the start. Examining the rectangles, it became clear that they were skillshundreds of skills combining elements of the common twelve skill groups and many species unique ones.

Great Dragon Aurum, Palag said. Companion of the emperor Tamin the first, and believed to have been the strongest creature of this age.

Strongest creature of the age Dallion could see that. Something with that many skills could do infinite combinations. Even if it didnt know spellcraft, which Dallion saw it did, the dragon would be able to conquer countries. That explained how the empire had turned into the power it was today.

Youre thinking that its all luck, isnt it? the fury asked.

Err?

The dragon. Any fool with a familiar that powerful could conquer the world without half trying. Well, you would be wrong. The Aurum didnt start out like that. Hes not even a dragon.

Hes not? Dallion looked at the creatures outline once more.

The overall shape and body structure were similar to what was described in the magic bestiary. Furthermore, there was a striking resemblance between Dark and the other dragonlets Dallion had come across.

Its a Quickgold Wyvern that the emperor had as a companion as a child. It was later that he figured out how to grant it skills, transforming it into the great dragon it later became known for.

The emperor was a mage, Dallion stated. This all but confirmed it.

Yep. The founder of the Academy before it was called the Academy. His majesty was also an avid artifact collector, which is how he uncovered a lot of old knowledge bringing rise to several magic disciplines, including Echo Training.

A fascinating story, making Dallion want to have met the man. By the sound of it, it was all but certain that the emperor was an otherworlder. The things that he did were what Dallion himself would have done. The major difference was that the emperor had been born with the magic trait, while Dallion was fortunate to acquire the empathy one instead.

Seven hundred and eleven skills, Palag said. Some of them extremely impressive. However, this is where the interesting part ends.

A new spell was cast, replacing the image by that of a standard human outline. There were nine clusters of rectangles surrounding him, not nearly as impressive as the what the dragon had displayed.

This is a standard echo. The number of skills vary, but as a rule of thumb, it doesnt have more than a few dozen.

Speak for yourself, Dallion thought. With the exception of Nil, all the echoes in Dallions personal domain had considerably more.

Why are some of the rectangles blank? Dallion asked.

Thats the echos potentialevery skill that it could have, but doesnt. And thats where magic comes in. Think of it as a shortcut capable of unlocking skills your echo hasnt learned.

A shortcut.

Not quite. The effort has to come from somewhere. You're simply replacing it with an equal amount of magic. Remember your magic extraction classes? It's the same here, and just as there, each skill requires more magic than the last.

The image of the echo vanished.

That was it? No wonder this class didn't have enough fans. The talk was definitely intriguing, but Dallion could have heard just as much while waiting in the dining room.

Normally, I'd give you a few dozen books, have a few tests, check your answers, and that would be it. However, seeing you're a special case, I think it's time for some practical examples. His fingers danced in the air. A moment later, a metal pyramid appeared in his hand. Shall we?

Dallion made his way to the fury and placed his hand on the item.

ITEM AWAKENING

The classroom disappeared, replaced by a small town. Looking about, Dallion saw that the buildings had a Greco-Roman motifone that was rather familiar.

The PYRAMID is Level 20

You are in an enormous dark steel domain.

Defeat the guardian to change the PYRAMID's destiny.

Did you make this, Nil? Dallion asked.

One of my better works, the old echo said with pride. I'm surprised that they're still using it. At the time, I got a lot of grief that my designs were over the top.

The buildings, the statues, even the tiles on the ground were made entirely of metal, giving an alien feel to the whole thing. There was no denying the craftsmanship, though. What skill had Adzorg used while creating it? It wasn't standard crafting, nor any of the magic courses Dallion had seen.

All of a sudden, a suit of armor appeared a few steps away.

TRAINING GUARDIAN

Species: METALIN

Class: IRON

Health: 100%

Traits:

- BODY 30

- MIND 20

- PERCEPTION 20

- REACTION 20

Skills: NONE

Weakness: NONE

Lux! Dallion burst into instances.

Weapons and gear emerged on him, ready for battle. The metalin, however, didnt budge.

Sorry, Palag intervened. Thats a dummy. It wont fight you.

The instances faded away, but Dallion remained in full gear.

I should have warned you about this. I wanted to illustrate the actual process.

There was no deceit visible within him, so Dallion unsummoned his shield and harpsisword. Any other entity, short of a chainling, would have been preferable to this. Then again, it was said that the Academy had created the concept of metalins, so it stood to reason they would be used for training.

I take it youve seen a metalin before? the fury asked.

Yes. During a mission, Dallion replied. Technically, he was telling the truth. Havoc had metalins in his personal domain.

Mages tend to use them a lot to protect against realm invasions. Nobles too, though mostly for their children. Nasty things to face. This one, though, the apprentice tapped the constructs helmet several times, is purely for skill training.

Dallion nodded slowly.

As with many things in life, there are three parts to echo training: mapping, testing, and teaching. Mapping is close to combat splitting in a way. You see, a web of possible abilities the entity could take skill-wise.

The explanation made Dallion think of precise item improvement. There he was still relying on combat splitting to pick the desired result during the improvement process.

Difference is that here you use a spell. The fingers of both hands moved as he slowly drew the magic patternan irregular six-circle frame with over thirty symbols, most of which Dallion had never seen.

Ten colorless rectangles appeared around the metalin each containing the name and symbol of the respective skill. Interestingly, only the basic skills were shown, not the subskills related to them.

Only ten skills? Dallion moved closer to one of the rectangles. His hand freely passed through, causing them to crumble away into nothingness. The moment he pulled it back, the rectangles re-emerged, the same as before.

That for this level of spell. You only see one layer beyond what the target has.

Fiddly, no doubt, but it provided a number of options. One thing was clearone would require a lot of additional information before granting skills to an echo or familiar. Back on Earth, it wasnt rare for

gamers to waste points on useless skills, crippling the entire build of their game characters. Of course, anyone could simply reset the creation process, then go online and follow the best practices established there. In this world, there was no such thing. Or was there?

Whats testing? Dallion asked.

Sharp. Palag smiled. While the spell is in effect, you can use your own mana to see what I would be like if a character had a skill.

Like a test run?

At some point, it had been. According to past records, the nymph mages did just that. The copyettes, too, but they always tended to steal abilities. Now, sadly, we can only test what skills would appear following a certain track.

Purple filled up the attack rectangle. Dozens of new rectangles popped up in the vicinity, all connected to the old one with semi-transparent threads.

The magic transfer is temporary. The moment I end the spell, itll return to me. In this state, though, Im temporarily weakened. If you were to attack me, Id be one magic level less.

One level for each skill? Dallion asked.

Precisely. Another blank rectangle filled up with purple.

What if I kill the dummy? Will you lose all invested magic?

No, theyll just go back to me.

The fury sounded rather calm, but he still ended the spell. All the rectangles vanished, making the metalin feel bare.

So, did you get the basics?

It was difficult, but I somehow managed, sir. Dallion struggled not to roll his eyes.

Including the spell?

This time Dallion had been caught off guard. He should have figured as much, given how slowly the fury was casting the spell. Explanations were only meant for toddlers, or in this case, rank one novices. From here on, no one was going to explain spells step by step, just slow down the casting time so that the students could catch a good enough glimpse of the pattern and learn to recreate it in their own time.

Almost, Dallion mumbled.

Good. Have a go and then well continue with more training specifics.

Dallion was ejected from the pyramids realm, returning to the classroom. This marked the long and tedious phase of getting the training spell done.

Days passed during the rest of the afternoon, with Dallion recreating the unknown symbols one by one within his own awakening realm. The complexity had jumped astronomically, making everything else hed learned so far seem pathetically easy. Even with Harps method, it would often be hours before he could successfully learn a new symbol, and just as much for him to perfect drawing it with ease.

After a weak real time, Dallion could no more. Moving back to the classroom yet again, he admitted defeat. His action was expected, even welcome it showed both instructor and student where Dallions limits were.

The rest of the lesson focused on discussing a few examples of creatures, the skills of which were entirely mapped. As it turned out, in addition to their skill-potential, creatures, as well as people, had something called affinity. That explained why low level awakened could be better at certain things than mid-level nobles. VendDallions guild mentor was one such case. His combat splitting remained unparalleled despite his current level. When it came to combat training, affinity played another, far more interesting, role: no magic had to be invested in the echo to learn that skill as long as another skill branching from it was learned as well.

Immediately, Dallion started thinking how he could game the system. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that affinity was rather a weird quirk than anything major. A person had one, or at most two, of those and the only way to find out for certain outside from observation the obvious was for the person to create an echo and spend a while exploring.

By the end of the lesson, Dallion was exhausted. Skipping the library visit, he went straight to his room to sleep. Katka must have known this would happen, for he found a letter from her telling him to skip their next two sessions. After feeling annoyed for a few minutes, Dallion then checked the letter with the kaleidevrsto on his bladebow. There didnt seem to be any hidden echoes. Just in case, Dallion went through the letters realm and even improved it a few times as a means of distracting himself. The result ended up as a letter made of glass. Naturally, that attracted the attention of Gem, who started casting spells on it. Despite all of Dallions attempts, the aetherfish was simply unable to understand the concept of awakening. As far as it was concerned, everything had to be a form of magic and Dallion either didnt know the right spell or was keeping the information secret.

Harp, Dallion said to his harpsisword. Are you permitted to help me with magic training?

I can guide you, the nymph replied in her ambiguous fashion.

Thats all I need.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Chapter 708: Nox's Skill Choice

It had been ages since Dallion used the combat arena of his awakening realm. In fact, he had barely set foot in it since the transformation of his realm. Even his echoes didnt bother, since there was no way for them to increase their skills, plus one good hit would mean their death.

Whys he training there? Gem asked, sitting atop Julys head.

Because it thinks itll make a difference, the echo said unapologetically.

Will it?

No, but it makes him feel better.

Quite an astute observation, given that for the last few days Dallion had been focusing only on learning the symbols he needed to cast the training spell. True to her word, Harp hadnt commented on the execution, only the methods of symbol drawing. What she did do was create a block of

running water that made casting considerably easier. Now Dallion not only had points he had to follow when drawing a symbol, but also the dotted line between them.

Hes doing rather well, the bowl dryad said. She, like everyone else in the realm, was at the arena watching the spectacle.

For a five-year-old, the armadil shield said, as he leant back. Youre doing great, Dal, he shouted. Make sure to learn how to bake blocks of water. That way, you can train cute apprentices how to cast magic better.

There was a time when the comment would have made Dallion flinch. After all the time spent together, he had gotten used to Vihrogons antics.

Idiot, he said, finishing drawing the final line. The symbol gained form, glowing bright purple in the water. This was the second time Dallion had managed to complete it. A few more times and hed finally be able to start casting. There was nothing stopping him even now, apart from the wisdom of knowing that half-hearted attempts would only take more time in the long run.

A short distance away, the aetherfish made yet another attempt to cast the spell. In its previous form it might well have succeeded, but when the Purple Moon had allowed the creature to become Dallions companion, he had also severely reduced its level. At present, anything more than five simple symbols presented a challenge.

Taking a moment to take a breath, Dallion cracked his fingers, then started drawing the symbol once more. His movements were a lot smoother than last time, releasing magic threads without mistake. One second and half of the symbol components were there. Encouraged, Dallion picked up the pace. Magic threads stretched from his fingers, following the awakened markers and water lines without fail.

Dull pressure built up in his temples, reminding Dallion that he was nearing his limit. Before it could turn into pain, the symbol was complete.

Three seconds, Onda cheered. Way to go!

Dallion didnt respond. In order for the spell to work, he had to be able to cast the entire thing in that amount of time or less.

The block of water fell to the ground, trickling off the arena field. No doubt Harp was hinting that Dallion needed a rest.

I want to cast it, he said, discreetly massaging his left temple.

Its too early, Harp replied. You need a few more days, at least.

Ill never go forward if I take so long.

Youll never go forward if you drag all your shortcomings with you. Sounds vibrated all over the nymphs body. I wont stop you, but you know that its a mistake.

Let the boy do it, Nil said. Sometimes the best way to learn is to break ones head a few times. In his case, maybe a dozen or so.

Dallion clenched his fists. What was with everyones attitude lately? He could tell there was no ill intent, but all echoes and guardians were starting to get more than a bit annoying and at a time when he needed their support the most.

One spell, he said. If I dont manage, Ill stop. He paused for a few moments. And if I succeed, youll guide me on how the actual training works. Both of you.

Leave me out of this, dear boy. This isnt a field I specialized in. Seeing that youre the only person taking the class, you can guess why.

That was highly doubtful, but Dallion decided not to make a big deal of it. If nothing else, the threat of asking advice might keep Nil quiet for a bit longer.

One attempt, the nymph said. And you cast in air.

It would have been better to use the water as well, but beggars werent choosers. Taking a deep breath, Dallion started recreating the spell. Normally, hed create the frame and symbols directly. This time, he started by completing the entire frame. Unlike symbols, it could remain in existence a lot longer, provided that he used a thread to reinforce it every second.

That done, Dallion focused on the symbols. Both hands moved with such speed that from the side, it would appear that Dallion had six arms in total. The high value of his reaction trait had won him many fights in the wilderness, and yet it was barely enough to allow him to cast a single complex spell. The pressure was so intense that Dallion couldnt afford to create instances. He had to rely that hed have it done in one go, like the majority of mages did.

Three to one that he makes it, Gen said, turning to Vihrogon.

What are we gambling with? the dryad asked, intrigued.

Numbers?

Then I sat two to one that he fails spectacularly at the last moment.

A chill appeared in Dallions fingertips, moving down through his hand. Ten seconds passed since the start of the spell and he was not even halfway there. Even with four symbols appearing every two seconds, the length of spell casting was far too long. His body rebelled, sending chills and blasts of heat through him. His fingers felt like ice, but didnt stop moving.

Just a few more, Dallion told himself.

Four symbols remained. All of them were easy to draw, though not so much with his hands going numb. Holding his breath, Dallion kept on releasing magic threads.

The final symbol was placed, completing the spell. The circles glowed, then collapsed into a single point. Now was the moment for Dallion to create an echo to serve as a test dummy. Before he could do that, a host of rectangles appeared around him, most of them blank. Surprised, Dallion turned to see where the threads of the purple ones led.

Nox? he asked in disbelief.

The puma had curled up on the edge of the arenas field, considerably closer than everyone else. It didnt seem neither alarmed nor interested in what had happened, snoozing comfortably.

Do we count that as a mess up? Vihrogon asked.

What the heck, Nox?! Dallion shouted.

The cracklings ear flicked upon hearing its name. Slowly it raised its head, stretched, yawned, then glanced at Dallion with a typical annoyed feline expression.

What? The familiar took a few steps forward.

A ball of mischief formed within the creatures stomach. Age and comfort hadnt fully erased the character of the cubling Dallion had saved all that time ago.

Noxs current skills were rather surprising. One could guess he had attack, athletics, and acrobatics, as well as the unique skills crack and spider web crack. The devour skill also wasnt too surprising. The fact that the puma had carving, was completely unexpected. So far, there hadnt been a single instant in which Nox had ever used that skill, even when he could have.

The potential skills he had the ability to learn were far more, not to mention that there were several rows of them far more than Palag had said there should be.

Did you do that? Dallion glanced at Harp. Why do I see so many skills?

Your perception, dear boy, Nil answered instead. The fury is a passable instructor, but there were certain things he tends to neglect, as do most mages. While magic can compensate for low trait values in some cases, with others, thats not the case.

Finally, a pleasant surprise. It only saved some time, but at least Dallion wouldnt have to chart the skills of all of his familiars. The only drawback was that the choices were overwhelming. As any experienced gamer, Dallion started reading the outermost skills first.

FISSURE TRAVEL

Allows Nox to use realms to instantly move between parts of a crack in the real world.

If the crack is in contact with other cracks, Nox can travel along them as well.

REALITY TEAR

Allows Nox to create tears within the reality of a realm and use them to enter or escape.

Not applicable to the reality of the real world.

Both of these were scary, to say the least. In order to reach them, Nox had to level up dozens, if not hundreds, of times. However, with Dallions new ability, he could obtain them a lot faster.

Will magic improvement work on Nox? Dallion asked.

Thats a rather good question. Nil scratched his chin. Having a crackling familiar is rather unusual. Normally, it shouldnt. Yet, you used a spell to show you his skill groups, so who knows? Maybe the nymph empire has come across something like this?

No way. Shook his head. It would have been big news. Star-spawn and magic dont mix well.

SHACKLE GUARDIAN

Allows Nox to shackle guardians, preventing them from affecting the realm they are in.

The shackles must be stronger than the guardian they are used on.

That sounded a bit too similar to delevling. The description explicitly claimed the skill only was meant for guardians, but in a world in which everything had a guardian, it was almost the same as if it affected a person. All it took was Nox to force all the guardians of someones clothes to work against him, for all sorts of mishaps to happen. It could even be possible to make a sword lose its sharpness, becoming as efficient as a steel bar.

Nox, what do you think? Dallion asked, still skimming through the rectangle descriptions. Willing to try gaining a new skill? No guarantees it wont hurt.

You bet I do, the puma said. This one. His paw went through one of the rectangles.

Dallion waited a few moments for the rectangle to re-emerge.

PACK FORM

Allows Nox to make multiple sets of paws, jaws, and eyes emerge from his body.

The number of sets depends on Noxs level.

That thing? Dallion blinked. Whyd you want that?

The skill was quite horrifying for a single-digit awakened. Even a low double-digit might have some difficulties. After a point, though, it became more of a cosmetic feature. Every large group of realm beasts could do that.

Its nothing special.

I like it, Nox insisted.

Okay, your choice, Dallion did his best to hide his disappointment. A moment ago, he was worried that Nox might want a skill that would make him too powerful. Instead, he had set his sights on effectively eye candy.

Concentrating, Dallion stretched some of his magic to his fingertips, then touched the rectangle. The threads flowed into the rectangle, filling it with purple. No sooner had that happened, when eight sets of eyes appeared on Noxs body.

Dallions experience as a hunter must have made him and everyone else in his realm quite jaded when it came to monsters with unusual abilities, for no one reacted; no one except one.

Thats really cool, big bro! Lux flew over the Puma. Youre really awesome!

Dont encourage him, Lux, Dallion sighed.

But hes awesome, the firebird said apologetically. Now he can see everywhere at once and also bite anyone who gets close.

He was able to do that before as well, Dallion wanted to say.

Allowing the puma to have its fun, Dallion then pulled back his magic. All extra eyes and yaws vanished, as did the skill rectangles.

Feeling his new abilities gone, Nox snorted.

Dont worry, buddy. Ill give you your skill. Dallion scratched him behind his ears. I just need to get a hang of this and go on a bit of magic harvesting.

Chapter 709: Eye of the Hurricane

Dallion didnt have any lessons with Katka the following day or the day after. The woman would always come up with an implausible excuse. Even without that, though, Dallion felt drained trying to keep up with his remaining lessons. Just three disciplines were enough to exhaust all the available time he had in his realm and in the real world. Strictly speaking, there was no reason for him to push himself so hard, yet the more he learned, the more eager he was to leave the Academy as quickly as possible.

Learning over three hundred symbols, Dallion stopped learning them individually, but rather focused on learning spells that could be useful and only looking up the symbols he lacked. The new approach yielded instant results. Having a good mind trait allowed him to remember more than the average number of patterns without half trying.

What little time Dallion had outside of class, eating, or sleeping, he spent gathering magic so he could grant Nox his wish.

It was almost laughable how easy magic gathering felt after all this time. What had initially taken him hours now was done in seconds. What was more, Dallion didnt have to constantly think about the speed of pulling, but had acquired a sense of it. In the worst-case scenario, he had to use combat splitting to find the sweet spot.

Once Dallion had managed to obtain enough magic to fill up all the artifacts the fury had given him, he ventured into his personal realm and got to work.

The first skill he granted Nox earned Dallion, the achievement Augmenter, plus another two points on his mind trait. Or rather, it would have earned him another two points if he hadnt reached his eighty-level cap. The remaining point was still there, but wouldnt be applied until Dallion passed his next gate. Still, that didnt dissuade him from continuing.

The second skill Nox was given was **Break Dash**the ability to create cracks while running. As Nil correctly pointed out, this was a skill only useful in the real world, but Dallion didnt mind. The real skill he wanted for his minion to have was the one that needed Break Dash as a prerequisite.

Using all the remaining magic he had amassed, Dallion empowered the skill **Crackling Concealment**. The skill seemed outright broken, allowing Nox to conceal his presence both in a realm and in the real world. What was more, in the real world, he could also conceal cracks, though that by no means mended the object. The way Dallion imagined it, he could hollow out a weapon, door, or even a piece of pavement and have it shatter when most convenient.

Dallions teachers had also noticed his improvement, giving him more complicated tasks. Palag even went so far as to procure a training magic holder artifact that Dallion could use to gather more magic to be used on training. The only downside was that Dallions usage of the artifact was carefully monitored and, other than filling it up with magic, he wasnt allowed to use it for anything outside of official training. Thus, a lot of time and effort was wasted giving skills to a dummy metalin without getting anything in return.

On the third day after learning how to grant skills to echoes and familiars, Katka finally informed him via letter that she was resuming their training. Appropriately, Dallion decided it was a good idea not to push himself too much before that.

You're going a bit better, the woman said, observing how he was entangling the magic threads coming out of his fingers. Looks like some rest was what you needed.

There was no way she could be further from the truth. Even so, Dallion said nothing.

How's your echo training class going?

Not bad, Dallion managed to say as sweat was trickling down his face. Didn't Palag tell you?

You assume I'd waste time with some no-name assistant, the woman laughed. And I know his name because Enroy told me.

That sounded like a touchy topic, so Dallion chose to ignore it. Instead, he tried to extend the magic threads out of his fingers, resulting in him completely breaking his concentration. Magic threads splintered in all directions, bringing to an abrupt end of the attempt.

I spoke too soon, Katka frowned. Rest a bit, then have one last go.

Thanks. Dallion struggled not to collapse to the floor. So, what's with all the meetings lately? Is the way getting closer?

Normally, he'd receive a quick and snarky response. The fact that he didn't got him concerned.

It is?

Closer than we'd like. There's been enemy sightings half a day from the imperial capital. It was just a small force, but the fact that it got there at all means that the Archduke is finished. The imperial legions have pulled back in an attempt to block the gap, and the territory's neighbors have re-allocated their forces. It's a mess.

There was nothing that could be said. Dallion felt a chill in the pit of his stomach. He had been led to believe that the empire was this omnipotent, ever-lasting entity in the world. Even now he still believed it, but there were clear signs it was not the case. Everywhere throughout the imperial territories nobles were propagating this subliminal message within their domains, but cracks were starting to form and when they got large enough to be noticed, chaos would follow.

Where does that leave us?

The question was unexpected, causing alarm and intrigue to emanate from Katka for a moment. She quickly subdued the emotions, crossing her arms.

Us?

Otherworlders, Dallion clarified. When it came to it, despite the major differences between him and the rest, and their attempts to kill him, he felt an inexplicable link to them. It was almost as if they were a family in some way. Earthlings.

You've had enough rest. Get back to your exercises.

The conversation ended there. Dallions concerns, though, didnt. For ten minutes he tried focusing on extending his magic, yet his head wasnt in it. All of a sudden, getting out of the Academy gained a much higher priority. If the war got to a stage at which the Academy had to get involved, Dallion would have no choice to become part of it just like his grandfather had. That hadnt ended up too well. The memory fragment of the former Dherma village chief had shown that Dallions grandfather had been rather skilled, and what was more liked. Supposedly, his victories had helped him become a noble, though even that hadnt been able to prevent his downfall.

Help me undo my seal. Dallion pulled back all his magic, ending the exercises. Ill owe you.

You already owe me. Besides, its not that simple. The seal isnt a form of punishment. Its a copy of the awakening gates. Any mage that doesnt have the skill to get rid of it wont make it outside.

Youve been a normie, you know what people say about mages. What do you think theyll do when they find out theres a mage thats weak?

I have other ways of dealing with them. Dallion smirked.

Youre only talking about things that you could see. Magic puts you on the map. You were protected from all the creatures you couldnt see. Now they can see you and they cant be defeated with what you got. She shrugged. But hey, I wont stop you. If youre so desperate, you can always cut off your hand. Painful, but easily regrowable for someone with your talent and familiars. I can even tell you which books to check out for the spells.

No! Nil shouted within Dallions realm. The risk involved is a lot more than she knows.

Dallion had no intention of going so far, but the suggestion made him think. If there was one loophole to the seal, it was very likely there would be others. For the moment, he agreed that there was more to learn, yet if he didnt manage to remove it on his own, soon, he might resort to more drastic means. It was proven that spark had an effect on magic. Maybe he could use it to burn through the seal, or failing that, he could use the Nox dagger?

Were done for today. Katka made it clear both the training and their conversation were over.

Tomorrow?

Only if youre serious about it.

Fair point

, Dallion thought.

Ill be here. Thank you, mage Katka. He bowed, then left the room.

Youre still revealing too much, Nil grumbled. At times I think youve forgotten everything I

How do I leave the building? Dallion interrupted.

What? Why do you think I know a way? And even if I did, why would I share it with you? Having gained some favor wont shield you from stupidity.

Nil, you know more than you claim, so cut the crap and tell me! Dallion paused for a few moments to regain his composure. Sorry. I just want to see whats outside. I wont run off. I dont even really want to set foot outside. I just need to see whats going on outside.

Are you sure? You cant unsee what youve seen, dear boy.

Not seeing is the problem.

If you insist

It turned out that there was a way. Following the novice corridor led to what could only be described as a service staircase. Decades ago, it was used by novices and apprentices to carry the mages their meals. With new buildings appearing, emerging on Academy ground, and the establishment of dedicated dining halls, the practice was gradually stopped, and the corridor used less and less.

A normal way to get rid of something unnecessary was to modify the realm of the building or bar it up in mundane fashion. Since this was a place of mages, though, a strong illusion spell was cast over the entrance, and nothing more. The spell was deemed powerful enough to prevent any novice from finding it, but as long as one knew where to look, there always was a way. Having an echo of someone who had been here while the staircase was active also helped.

Remember, you mustnt destroy it, Nil said. Just cast the spell I showed you and pass through.

The spell in question was an anti-illusion spell, allowing Dallion to ignore illusions in the short term. It would have been quite useful back when he was facing the spectral shardfly in the fallen south. If hed known magic back then, he might not have lost Gleam.

Are you sure itll work? Dallion asked as his fingers danced in the air, casting the spell. Its a bit simple.

Novices must learn to do whats difficult, not whats useful. There are plenty of symbols that are more shall we say, potent than the ones you know, while being easier to create. Thats why they are kept secret.

Dallion could see the logic. Telling children how to create the equivalent of rocket launchers wasnt a terribly good idea.

The spell collapsed on itself, then extended all over Dallions hand and body, covering him with a purple mesh.

I just walk through? he asked.

Go ahead.

Ignoring his instincts, Dallion took a step forward. The wall didnt stop him in the least, letting him go through as if it were made of air. Even weirder, turning around, Dallion could see the archway as well as the corridor he had come from.

Single direction spells, Nil grunted in disapproval. A proper mage would have cast it on both sides, regardless of the circumstances. People sure have gotten lazy throughout the years.

All part of human nature. Dallion rushed up the staircase.

Each floor had a similar opening, and just as on the first floor, the illusion was only active for those in the corridor. After five floors, the staircase transformed into a narrow stairwell continuing upwards. Dallion could safely assume that was the final stretch leading to the roof. He still had to be careful not to be spotted by any flying mages outside the White Eye, especially but for all intents and purposes, he was a step away from his immediate goal.

What do you hope to find out, anyway?

Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot.

Trying to be cryptic doesn't suit you, dear boy. It only makes you sound silly.

Just as Dallion was about to answer, he reached the top of the staircase. As Nil had described, there was a small dome with openings that provided a view to the outside world. One glanced and Dallion half wished that he had taken the old echo's advice.

The sight had nothing in common with what he had seen upon his arrival. This was no longer a cluster of buildings; it was a war zone. Giant magic spheres were everywhere, preventing millions of shardflies from flying amok. Less than a third of the original structures remained guarded by layers of protective runes and golem-like constructs. The scariest thing of all was that everyone in view was carrying on as if this was normal.

Is that all covered by illusions? Dallion asked.

No illusions, it's what it is. The shardfly issue seems to have been more widespread than everyone thought.

And you find that normal?

No, I don't. However, everyone else seems to.

Chapter 710: Phoel's Request

Most of the night was filled with sleeplessness. And in-between bouts of sleeplessness, there'd be brief periods of nightmares, lucid to the point that it was impossible to tell whether they were real or not. In all instances, Dallion would witness the Learning Hall destroyed by waves of emerald shardflies. In some he tried to reason with them, in some he tried to fight, but the outcome was always the same. The creatures were like a tidal wave, sweeping over everything in their path. They knew no pause or mercy, slicing everything to bits until nothing remained.

No! Dallion rose up in his bed.

His face was covered with sweat. Everything in the room remained still and quiet. Ruby was on a wall, wings folded. Gem was nowhere to be seen, probably floating about in Dallion's personal realm. Only rays of moonlight shone in from outside, adding color to the darkness.

Why's this happening? Dallion wondered.

It wasn't the most devastating event he'd witnessed in his life, nor was it the most traumatic. Yet, for some reason, it had such a great impact that one would think it was the most devastating.

Unpleasant, isn't it? a boy around ten in dark clothes asked, standing a few steps away from Dallion's bed.

Dallion was just about to ask what was going on when he noticed that he too was in his child's appearance.

I'm still dreaming, Dallion said. Aren't I?

The other's clothes and hair turned green, glowing as brightly enough to illuminate the rest of the room.

That's part of the curse. Something of a reminder to keep people from getting too comfortable.

I was getting too comfortable? Dallion thought.

Yes. The boy's eyes glinted as he shot an angry glare Dallion's way. All the hardships you've experienced were while pursuing personal objectives. Did you ever consider what you've done to be cursed? Did you try to take any steps to rectify it?

It was difficult to deny that Dallion hadn't given the matter any consideration. To be honest, there were times when he'd forgotten about it entirely.

That's part of the problem, and the reason punishment is required. You're amusing and you've done some good things, for which you were given a lot of leeway. Clearly, that was a mistake.

No one ever told me what

Some things you're supposed to figure out for yourself, the Green Moon interrupted. We could have warned you before and you still would have done it. You'd either claim that you had no choice or you'd be able to handle the punishment, or maybe ask to make it up to us. It's all been done before by you and others. In the end nothing would change.

So, I get nightmares until I figure it out?

Dallion felt his hair stand on edge. What if it was more than nightmares? If an item got upset with a person, it would make its handling difficult; if an area was mad at someone, it would try to trip him every chance it got. However, what happened if the whole world was displeased?

Is this my final warning? he asked.

The Moon chuckled.

Of course not. You've seen all the warnings you'd get. I'm here because of your current problem.

My current problem? Dallion blinked.

Just because you're cursed, doesn't mean you aren't my favored. I'm just here to say you've made a mess of things.

Thanks. I gathered

Not with us. Rather on a far more local level.

That was a surprise. Dallion went through everything important he'd done since arriving here. Was getting the Moonstone a mistake? Or maybe he wasn't supposed to get involved with Raven? Or with Katka?

Did I cause the shardfly infestation? he asked.

Do you really want to know the answer to that? Ignorance can be bliss.

I've already heard that once today.

The question remains.

I want to know. Dallion replied instantly.

Then the answer is yes.

Dallion felt the weight of a mountain on his shoulders. He was responsible for all this?

How?

That's not something I can tell you. I'd like to, but there are rules in place and I can't go beyond them.

What about the Purple Moon? Can he tell me? Anger and desperation exploded in Dallion's mind sweeping through him like a wave.

Definitely not. He still doesn't like you. Even if he did, there's no going around this one. It's only partially your fault.

Then why tell me at all?

Because you asked me to.

The same old story. If this was the Moon's standard method of interacting, no wonder that many had found the Star so alluring. The Moon's didn't have to be nice, they were right and objective. The Star was neither, but was always so pleasant about it.

Is there a way out? Dallion stood up, taking a step towards the Green Moon. Something I could realistically achieve?

Yes, but that's not the question. What you should be asking yourself is what way out you must follow.

There are more than one?

Once you figure things out, it'll become clear. Then, with luck, you'll remember this conversation and it'll help you decide what to do.

What if I make a mistake because of it?

That's always a possibility. The green boy clapped his hands, turning into a silhouette of green dust that floated gently to the floor. Either way, it'll be fun watching.

In Dallion's experience when someone said that it meant they had little faith in the person in this case him succeeding. There had to be a reason for the Moon sharing what he did. As to what that reason was it was safer to guess by throwing darts at a wall. This was no longer the case of debt or favors. Dallion was left to his own devices, free to figure things out or create a bigger mess of the situation.

Was that what being past level forty was about? Possibly. It would definitely explain the chaos caused by the nobles actions.

Is everything alright, dear boy? Nil asked. I warned you it would be better if you focused on whats in this building. There are plenty of problems here for you to be searching for more.

What if the outside problems come in? he asked.

The echo couldnt answer.

Turning to the side, Dallion closed his eyes and tried to get back to sleep. Unfortunately for him, he succeeded, which brought a new series of nightmares. By morning, Dallion had seen a wide variety of chaos and destruction. Still, as any diligent student, he spent a minute burying it deep inside him, then continued with his daily routine.

Spelling came first. The mage was in a particularly foul mood, for some reason. Three novices were kicked out of class for failing to do their spells up to his standards. Cheska and Raven were not present, so they avoided the yells, insults, and sarcasm. Dallion, though, wasnt as lucky.

Despite performing the spells requested quickly and efficiently, the mage wouldnt stop nitpicking. If it wasnt the position Dallion held his hands in, it was his overall posture, the clothes he wore, even the length of his hair.

Knowing when to act and when not, Dallion took the abuse, then sat back down to go through the rest of the lesson.

Once over, Dallion was about to rush to gather more magic threads so he could teach the rest of his echoes and familiars a few skills, when Phoil blocked his path.

Hey, the large boy said. Got some time?

No. Dallion tried to pass by.

I need a favor, okay? Phoil grabbed him by the shoulder.

Normally, Dallion could consider that as part of Phoils typical bullying. After their experience in the Purple Moons realm, he wasnt so certain. The boy had seen firsthand what Dallion was capable of with and without magic. There was no way hed mess with him unless it wasnt Phoil messing, but the echoes within his realm.

Youre still good at focused improvements, right? the boy whispered.

Its not something you forget. Dallion crossed his arms. Not in a few weeks, anyway.

I want you to upgrade something for me.

Phoil, I really dont have the time to

Ill give you artifacts!

Splitting into instances, Dallion looked about. Most of the other novices had been quick to get out as quickly as possible, expecting a scene. The few that remained didnt seem overly interested, although looks could be deceiving. Thankfully, there didnt seem to be any curiosity emanating from them.

ITEM AWAKENING

The classroom disappeared, changing into a large padded room.

Where are we? Phoil asked.

The SHIRT is level 2

A blue rectangle emerged.

You are in a large cotton hall.

Defeat the guardian to change the SHIRTs destiny.

A shirt? the large boy blinked.

Was the first thing I could think of. Dallion shrugged. Currently, he was twice taller than Phoil. The change of perspective was rather appealing, urging Dallion to grin. Despite the urge, he managed to resist. So, whats this about artifacts?

I can get you some. Several of them!

Riiight? Dallion nodded.

I just need you to improve a sword I bring you to quicksilver then to something else.

Already there were warning flags. The something else aside, turning whole weapons into mercury, wasnt either particularly safe or simple. And that didnt even touch the big question: what did Phoil need such a weapon or? Weapons were discouraged. True, novices with influential parents could take advantage of an exception or two, but why would a child bring one to the Academy?

What artifacts?

Shapeshifting weapons, mirror shields

Disfocus rings?

There was a moment of silence.

Err, yeah. Disfocus items can be arranged.

Now Dallion was all but certain that an echo was talking.

What about magic items? Can you get me a few of the things we used in class back when we were rank one?

Err, sure? How many?

Ten. If he was going to ask, he was going to ask for a lot.

Sure. After you get it done.

Ill need to know what the something else is.

Why?

Because Ill be the one improving the weapon to that.

Fear and confusion sprouted within Phoil, filling his entire chest and head like clusters of grapes.

Why cant I tell you when you start?

Youre the one asking for a favor. I dont need the artifacts that much. Good luck trying to find someone else to improve your stuff.

Despite the echoes advising him, Phoil was a terrible poker player. Even without having music skills, Dallion could tell hed agree to the demand. It was beyond apparent that the boy had no choice; his face twisted, trying to cover up the fact, quickly giving up in a few seconds.

Fine. Its silver glass, he said with a pout.

Silver glass?

Its like quicksilver, but solid. Very rare, but its possible to make by improving quicksilver.

Heard of this, Nil? Dallion asked.

As a matter of fact, I have. It was a popular material for noble weapons a few centuries ago. Very shiny, quite durable, but utterly useless. The common rumor was that it could be used to kill mages, but thats rubbish.

It cant?

Dear boy, everything can be used to kill mages. Silver glass doesnt have any effect on spells, barriers, or even armor. It can kill a mage the same way a sharpened stick can.

Whats so special about it?

Did I mention that its shiny? Nil let out a dry laugh. Other than that, absolutely nothing. Its not even transparent.

When do you need it done? Dallion asked.

Ill need a few days to get the artifacts. Maybe a week. Ill tell you when everything is ready.

At least Phoils echoes meant business. It was nice for someone to have the payment ready in advance for a change.

Alright. You have a deal. Dallion nodded. Do you need a Moon vow?

No, just the improvement.

Dallion narrowed his eyes. Was Phoil playing dumb all of a sudden?

Alright, see you in a week, then. Dallion returned to the real world.