

## Leveling up 751

### Chapter 751: The Spying Thread

The room was exactly as Dallion remembered it. Clean, yet untouched, it was almost as if Hannah was expecting for him to return some day, even after all this time. Apparently, him moving out to Eurys place and joining the Academy had never taken place.

Hey, Dal! A wave of greetings erupted. Welcome back!

Normally, he had developed a habit of ignoring guardian small talk, but it was a bit different here. These were guardians he knew better than most. Other than the ones he traveled with, these were the among the first guardians hed spoken with, and as the saying went, one never forgot the first of anything.

Heya, he said, slowly making his way to the mirror. Im just here for a few days.

It was ironic that he found the need to provide explanations to low-level guardians he probably wouldnt see in years, or maybe not at all.

We know, the building guardian replied. Hannah told us.

She spoke to you? Dallion asked in a gotcha moment.

*She mumbles to herself when annoyed. She comes here every week to clean up, then locks the room again.*

So, she really had been keeping the room ready for him all this time. The innkeeper had done the same for Jiroh too, and yet not for Eury. Whatever had transpired there must have been more serious than either of them was letting on.

The stone orchid was also in the room. What little progress had been made in the past was all gone. Thanks to his magic sight, Dallion was able to see the aether threads within the chunk of stone. Unfortunately, that also helped him see how much the big had regressed.

I think that ship has sailed, the armadil shield said. Youre just going through the motions. Which wouldnt have happened if you had followed my advice.

Dallion looked away, not even in the mood to argue.

Ill take a nap, he said, taking off his gear. Please keep an eye out for me.

Of course, the room guardian said, along with several item guardians.

Part of Dallion was afraid hed get some nasty nightmares while resting. On the other hand, it could hardly be as bad as what he experienced downstairs. The Nox dagger always with him, Dallion lied down on the bed and instantly dozed off.

When next he opened his eyes, it was almost evening. Golden light was shining through the window into the room. In a semi-annoyed state, Dallion grumbled that he should have pulled the curtains, when something caught his attention. A purple thread, no thicker than a hair, had made its way through a minuscule gap in the window-frame into the room. If he didnt have a magic trait, Dallion wouldnt have noticed. Now, though, it contrasted to the lack of magic anywhere in the room. Due to his circumstances, Pan made sure to keep a low profile, which included keeping the

inn as magicless as possible. Having a magic thread invade the room could mean only one thing: someone from outside was spying on Dallion.

Gem, Dallion thought. Go invisible and follow the thread.

Err, okay, boss, the aether jellyfish replied.

*I dont want you to attack or get too close. Im fine with a general location.*

*Yes, boss.*

*And tell me the moment you see anything strange, not before that.*

*Err sure, boss.*

Pretending to ignore the thread, Dallion stretched then got up from the bed. For the next minute or so, he went through his exercise regimensomething that hadnt been doing adequately as of late. Once done, he cast a quick spell to get rid of the sweat, then geared up again.

Seeing that the thread hadnt reacted in the least made him think this wasnt so much a spell as natural magic. More than likely a fury was spying on him. As tempting as it was to think that it might be Diroh, Dallion rather suspected it had to do with the general. That would definitely explain how the snob was always so well informed. Thanks to his small army of furies, he could spy on the entire city without anyone knowing. It would take a mage, or at least another fury, to even spot the air current threads; and since mages almost never came here, it was all but certain that he wouldnt get caught. Adzorg had probably been aware from the very beginning.

So, thats how you know I was an empath, Dallion thought. Even alone, he had spoken to items out loud.

See you later, all, Dallion said, heading to the door.

Wouldnt it be a bit obvious taking me along? The armadil shield asked.

After last time, not that much, Dallion replied mentally.

A small crowd had started to gather at the inn. Dallion was able to catch some murmurs regarding Di on his way out. From what he could make out, this was the first time the fury wasnt there to serve. Considering that neither war, nor the Countess brutal restrictions had prevented her from doing so in the past, this was viewed as rather unusual.

Dallion didnt know whether to be proud or concerned. Apparently, his presence was considered far worse than the provincial civil war.

The first thing he did when leaving the inn was to look around for a Mirror Pool agent. Finding one proved a lot easier than expected. The disfocus artifacts that were so efficient at making someone invisible glowed like purple beacons.

You should have spent some time making them mage proof, Dallion thought as he walked directly to a stall merchant. The woman wasnt someone Dallion had met beforeat least the Mirror Pool had the wisdom to get everyone he knew away from here. Unfortunately, that wasnt good enough.

Hi, Dallion said in a low voice. Tell whoever's in charge to meet me at the Performers Plaza.

Excuse me? the woman asked in utter disbelief. This was probably the first time anyone had seen through her disguise artifact.

Dont waste time. You know who I am and you know what I can do. Convey my message or I'll scorch you, then go to the next person and ask the same.

The threat was a bit too much, but it had the desired effect, causing the woman to rush off. Her figure disappeared among the crowd. Moments later, all other purple glowing members also rushed out of sight.

You definitely have a strong effect on women, Vihrogon sighed. I dont think you'll be able to use that trick again anytime soon.

I dont have to. Dallion split in a few instances and looked around. No other members of the Mirror Pool were in sight, although the magic thread from his room had moved so as to follow him. Whoever was following him was rather persistent.

Gem, have you found the source? Dallion walked down the street.

Not yet, boss. Its constantly moving.

*How far have you gone?*

*Err, not far. Its just moving a lot.*

That made sense. Air currents had a limited range. The fury spy was probably no more than a few hundred feet from his current location. If he wanted, Dallion could easily split into a hundred instances and catch the culprit. For the moment, he preferred to let them be. As one would say at the Academy: better leave someone just enough thread to hang themselves.

Going to the plaza was accompanied with a thousand smells, the vast majority good. The only reason Dallion didnt stop at a stall to buy something was because he didnt have the right currency to do so. This represented a huge difference from the time when he had first arrived in the city. Back then, it was a struggle to find anything he could, but with the few copper and silver coins he owned. Now, he could buy entire buildings with what he carried in his pouch.

The sound and music of Performance Plaza hit Dallion long before he reached the location. The place had maintained its undisputed charm, but a high perception turned every small imperfection into an eyesore. Clearly, there was a reason why nobles preferred theater performances to spending time among less skilled performers. As much as he hated to admit it, Dallion could fully understand why top-tier awakened didnt mingle with anyone else.

Ropes crisscrossed the space above the plaza, creating lines on which performers could dance, play, and juggle often while doing acrobatic tricks. It almost seemed like yesterday when GloriaDallions childhood sweetheart had engaged in a performance duel with one of the locals. That was long before her involuntary involvement with the Mirror Pool and subsequent marriage.

You really should see how shes doing, the armadil shield said. Now that youre pretty much single.

Im not single. Dallion looked about for a place to sit. Even without the festival crowds, the plaza remained quite packed.

*Keep telling yourself that. Either way, you wont lose anything by paying her a visit. At worst, youll be catching up with an old friend. And if it so happens that things between her and Falkner arent as rosy as they seemed, maybe itll be better for everyone if you stepped in. People fall for mages, trust me on that.*

If that were the case, whys Katka single?

Spotting a nice bench, Dallion whispered to the respective item guardian to loosen a bit just enough to cause the person sitting on it to slip off. The result was painfully hilarious, causing the unfortunate soul to move away cursing. His spot was quickly taken by Dallion, who not only mended the bench but also improved it for good measure.

Smooth, Vihrogon said. And as for Katka, shes also a possibility. Personally, I dont think youll be a good match, but, hey. Who am I to judge?

Youve become very talkative lately. All the more since we returned to Nerosal. Anything youre not telling me?

*Plenty of things.*

The shield laughed. *Sadly, not always by choice.*

Dallion was just about to inquire more on the matter, when a fury in a rather elaborately expensive dress appeared on the bench next to him. She wasnt fast enough to keep Dallion from noticing her approach, although for most people in the plaza, her sudden arrival remained unnoticed.

Hello, champion, the fury said with a confident smile. The last time theyd seen each other, Dallion was the one begging to buy magic artifacts from her. How may the Mirror serve you?

You? Dallion frowned. Youre in charge of the Mirror Pool?

In a way. Our prince decided it would be better to send someone youre familiar with to discuss matters on his behalf. In that regard, you can consider me as the voice of the Pool.

Several dozen aether threads spread from the fury, serving both as a lookout and a means to ensure privacy. Unsurprisingly, the thread that had been following Dallion in the last ten minutes had disappeared.

Gem, are you still on the thread? Dallion asked.

*Yes, boss. Its moving around your area*

Keep at it. I see business is better now that the countess is gone, Dallion told the fury.

The Mirror Pool is extremely fond of the Archduke, the woman stressed. Just as we are fond of your progress. Its not often that we deal with esteemed members of the Academy.

Given that they had dealings with the current archmage on several occasions at least, Dallion found the response hilarious.

I'll only be here for a few days and I want everything to be calm during that time, Dallion said directly. Am I clear?

Of course. It was going to happen, even without your request.

So far, so good. The Pool was smart enough to acknowledge his current position.

Tell me everything you know about the Icepicker guild.

Are you interested in the official story? Or the rumors?

Dallion narrowed his eyes.

Most of the local captains are on their way back, the woman said, catching his drift. Officially, many of the banished guilds are expected to make a return, including the Icepickers. Many of the local members who were forced to change guilds are already wearing their Icepicker emblems. The vice guild master has already paid a large sum of money to have the guildhall rebuilt.

That was interesting information, though not what Dallion was interested in.

For the moment, the future of three of the guilds stars remains uncertain, the fury continued. It remains unconfirmed, but word is that the guild master has agreed to take the position of viscount and gain control of the city. Given his relation to Archduke Lanitol, there's little surprise there. The county, though, will fall under the direct rule of the archduke himself.

Go on.

Captains March and Adzorg remain unknown. Adzorg was said to have left the city long ago. In fact, rumor is that you've actively been searching for him ever since the changes at the Academy.

It remained a mystery how the Mirror Pool got their information, but they were spot on.

As for March, matters remain unclear. According to some sources, she's still in the city's prison. Others say that she was released when Archduke Priscord was informed of her promotion. Some believe she's hiding in Nerosal, some even claim that she was killed and secretly buried in an unmarked grave. I'm sad to say that even we can't say what's true and what not.

You seem to be slipping. Dallion wasn't able to miss the opportunity.

Former imperial soldiers are extremely loyal to one another. The fury's smile didn't falter, but Dallion could feel the faint emanation of annoyance coming from her. Vend has also been lying low. A few times we thought he showed up, but he vanished before we could reliably confirm it.

He's always been skilled. I heard that he was part of the Mirror Pool at one point?

A very minor part a long time ago. Would there be anything else you desire?

No. Dallion leaned back. You have my thanks.

I'm glad. The Pool is always glad to accommodate people of power.

Chapter 752: Thread Chasing

Always glad to accommodate people of power, Dallion repeated. Magic certainly made people, and organizations, change their attitude towards someone. In the past, the Mirror Pool had mugged, blackmailed him, even tried to kill him. Theyd made him the star of a game in one of their gambling dens. Now, they were acting like servants.

A small part of Dallion was tempted to root out this den of villainy. He had the power and the political backing to ensure that there'd be no consequences. Just a few hours and the most ominous underworld organization of Nerosal would be no more. No one would come to harm at least no one that didn't deserve it. People might even praise him. However, doing so would make him no different from the last Star.

Closing his eyes, Dallion took a deep breath. He'd recite the names of the Moons if he thought that would make things better. Sadly, it wouldn't. Thinking about it just risked worsening his mood.

Err, the thread is moving towards you, Gem said. Its getting longer.

Dallion split into ten instances.

I see it, he said. Quite brave for his spy to venture so close to an open space. Gem, I want you to move so you're on the other side of the thread.

Hmm? The aetherfish sounded confused.

Just make sure that its between you and me. Dallion stood up. Ill take care of the rest.

Something in his action must have alarmed his pursuer, for the aether thread quickly moved away. Unfortunately, it was already too late.

Trip up everyone! Dallion ordered, using his empathy trait.

A split second later, he cast a flight spell and darted in the direction of the thread.

Beneath him, people started tripping. For the most part, it was that non-awakened that started tumbling down beneath him. There was no logical reason or it just a freak coincidence turned epidemic. Most of the people even found it humorous, though not much so the performers who struggled to remain on the ropes above the plaza.

*Focus on furies*

, Dallion clarified, rushing after the thread. A few moments later, the glow vanished, as the person he was chasing cut off the air current like a lizard's tail. A good strategy, though pointless. Dallion had no doubt that his target was a fury and furies relied on air currents to move about. Even with one gone, more would appear and Gem was going to sniff them out like a bloodhound.

The threads vanished, the aetherfish said.

Stray there, Dallion ordered. Even after all this time, Gem still wasn't the most reliable being when it came to tracking things in the real world. Get ready, Ruby. Dallion's fingers cast a new spell.

A portal emerged in front of him. Using the aetherfish as an anchor point, he teleported half a mile from the plaza and immediately burst into instances. Hundreds of him spread out, covering several blocks of the city, and then Dallion found it: the unmistakable emanation of magic that had been spying on him since his room. He only glanced at the figure for a moment, but it was enough. Two

new spells were cast. Clusters of lightning engulfed the area, draining magic from everything they touched. At the Academy, this would be a devastating spell; here it was a scalpel only noticed by people with magic in other words, furies.

You don't have to go overboard, the armadil shield said.

It won't hurt them much, Dallion replied as his own flight spell lost its strength.

With all magic in the area gone, gravity pulled him back to the ground. For someone with a body trait of over sixty, that was hardly an issue, though. Dallion spread his arms and legs, letting himself glide for a bit. It wasn't exactly gliding, and it merely slowed his fall for fractions for a second, but enough to hear the hump of someone else hitting the ground.

Got you! Dallion thought, as he crashed down moments later. Rolling forward on contact, he quickly jumped up, dashing in the direction of the sound.

Only two of his instances sprained an ankle. The rest took different routes in an attempt to catch up to the fury. Alas, by the time they had reached the point of impact, there was no one there. The only thing that remained behind were a few marks on the ground.

Clever, Dallion thought.

A while back, the neighborhood was bustling with shops and mid-tier guildhalls. With the changes the countess had imposed, the guilds must have moved or closed down. No one had said it openly, not even the overseer, but the internal conflicts must have reduced the awakened population significantly. On the surface, the buildings remained almost the same they had been years ago, but it was all an empty shell. In all likelihood, it would take years to fill up again, possibly even decades considering the greater war taking place. That made it the perfect place to hide.

Hundreds of Dallion's instances checked the doors. A few words with the guardians was all that was needed for him to see whether someone had gone inside. The answer was always no, but in one case Dallion spotted an inconsistency: a trail of fresh dust leading to a building and an area guardian that insisted that no one had been there for months.

Ruby fluttered off Dallion's shoulder, ready to slice up the door open.

No, Dallion whispered. There was no need to kill anyone. A quick spell and the lock opened.

In five of Dallion's instances, the door burst open, as a wave of ice pushed him back. In the rest, Dallion shattered it with a measured point attack.

Ice fragments flew everywhere, shooting out of the buildings windows. Taking advantage of the momentum, Dallion rushed in. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of someone rushing down the staircase to the buildings basement.

Nice try. He cast a zap spell and sent it in the person's direction. Had it been a normal bolt, it would have hit the wall, causing no harm whatsoever.

Unfortunately for Dallion's target, before that happened, the bolt curved, spinning down the staircase.

Dallion was just about to follow when a large figure in full metal armor blocked his way. A massive broadsword slashed three quarters of his instances, making it clear that he wouldnt be able to win this on magic alone. Of course, that wasnt a reason for him to give up.

Five aether barriers formed between Dallion and the blade, slowing the attack down. The strength of the attack was impressive, for all five of them were shattered without issue.

Leaping back, Dallion drew his harpsisword. Metal clashed again, metal, as blows were exchanged faster than the eye could follow. In mere seconds, hundreds of attacks and counter attacks had taken place, after which both Dallion and his opponent stopped.

They said you were nowhere to be found. Dallion took a step back, still holding his harpsisword.

No one really looked. The person in armor removed her helmet, revealing Marchs face.

For several seconds Dallion just stood there, not moving a muscle. Even with all his magic, he knew that the woman could end him if he let his guard down. Shed already done that to at least one mage Dallion knew of. In the past they had been guildmates, more than thattheyd even been friends, but time and war had a tendency to change anyone. Maintaining a few dozen instances at the ready, Dallion tried to determine how things stood between them. When March put away her weapon, he let out a mental sigh of relief.

Youve improved a bit, she said. I thought that after joining the Academy, youd only rely on magic.

Lucky that I didnt. Dallion didnt expect their first meeting to be like this. I heard you were dead. He lowered his own weapon. Or imprisoned somewhere.

Im always imprisoned. March tapped her armor. Part of my punishment. Youve done pretty well for yourself. From fugitive to mage. Usually, its the other way around.

Dallion forced a semi-smile.

And wheres Vend? Still among us?

Oh, hes alive, just not in the best of shape. Hed have liked to see you, but

I can heal him, Dallion said without hesitation. I have the skills now.

I know. Maybe later. He never got along with authorities, even you. Nothing personal.

Dallions first mentor didnt want to see him and that wasnt supposed to be personal?

You didnt have to spy on me, Dallion quickly changed the topic. If you wanted to talk, Id have come see you.

A faint purple glow covered Marchs face. It lasted a fraction of a second, but Dallion noticed it. And the moment he did, he reacted. His harpsisword thrust forward, flying towards the womans chest. Caught by surprise, March barely managed to move to the side, letting it scrape her breastplate. The action was uncharacteristically sloppy, giving Dallion enough time to prepare a new spell.

Youve not March, he said in a firm voice, a nine circle-spell near completion around his left hand. Who are you?



Stop! a voice said. While there was no one nearby, Dallion noticed the thin thread of magic coming from the basement. It was the same that had been spying on him all day. I was spying on you! A fury emerged.

The moment he saw her, Dallions eyes widened.

Di? he blinked. In his mind, it had been yesterday when he left her in Hannahs care. In truth, over a year had passed and in that time, she had become unrecognizable.

The punky teen was a full head taller than what he remembered. Slender and elegant, she resembled a young woman. If it werent for her white skin and blue hair, one might almost mistake her for Jiroh.

Skye, the fury said. As she did, Marchs face changed color, then the shape turned into a cloud. The creature flew out of the armor, leaving the empty husk to fall to the floor with a loud clang. Regaining its fox shape, it curled around Dirohs neck.

That was Skye? Dallion wondered. He should have felt the creature despite its disguise. Instead, it had completely fooled him.

Guess youre not the only one whos changed. Dallion ended his spell, causing it to fizzle away. I remember you being nicer.

Oh, she still likes you. She just gets overprotective at times. And I had to learn a few tricks to keep her, and myself hidden.

Some tricks. Dallion knew mages that werent as capable as that. Now that the cloud puff had left the armor, he could sense some of its emotions. As the fury had said, he still felt a lot of positive emotions towards him, along with vicious protectiveness.

Blocker items? Dallion asked. Blocker armor? he kicked the armor with the tip of his shoe.

Hannah told me not to try to see you, but I thought I could pull it off without you noticing. It always worked in the past.

There werent any mages in the past, Dallion said.

He was half right. Even with Adzorg done, there was one person who had the potential to become a mageDiroh herself. It wasnt the standard type of magic. The trait didnt seem to be as defined as his; rather, she seemed to have acquired a new unique set of skills which she could controllike a crimson fury, only different. More importantly, though, he could tell she had become a double digit.

This is an unexpected turn of events, the armadil shield said. Didnt see that coming.

Which part? Dallion asked.

*All of it. A self-taught ice fury is even more impressive than you.*

Nil had said something similar at the time. According to the old echo, such furies werent supposed to exist, but came about due to some accident or other. The crimson furiesor blood furies, as some called themwere supposedly created by the Imperial family. In a way, they were like the emperors Praetorian guard, loyal to him above everything else. Di, on the other hand, was the result of an accident due to a hunter hiding the skill gem of magic within her realm for years.

Dont worry. For the first time in a long while, Dallion felt a natural smile come to his face. Everything is fine now.

### Chapter 753: Bishop's Invitation

Are you sure this is fine? the fury asked.

Eating in the open wasnt something vaguely dangerous or controversial, but for someone who had spent the large part of the year in hiding, it felt like pushing her luck. It didnt help that all the passersby were glancing in their direction. The curiosity of most was centered on Dallion. Images remained a rarity in Nerosal, even after all the turbulent events. Also, given his recent display, hiding his identity would have been a greater bother than revealing himself to the public. Archduke Lanitol wasnt going to be particularly pleased, but Dallion didnt give a damn.

Youre safe, Dallion said, finishing his snack. The overseers keeping an eye on us.

Yeah, I noticed.

Half a dozen city guards were scattered about the area, half of them in a not at all subtle fashion. In contrast the Mirror Pool had made a point to steer clear, just as they had promised.

Everything is fine now, right? Diroh frowned. When you said that, you didnt add youd be using my money to get a bite.

Dallion paused for a while, then tossed her his pouch. Buy something with that.

The fury opened it. Her eyes widened for a few seconds, after which she quickly closed it again. The point was well made. Slightly tempted, she moved the pouch about in the air, then placed it back on the table near to him.

So, tell me how youve been. Dallion made a sign for the food stall owner to bring more food. The man, who was a low-level awakened, quickly obliged. The fact that a mage was eating at his place was certain to boost profits for months to come.

That again? There isnt much to tell. While youve been having fun, I worked my ass off. Hannahs nice and all, but you cant get customers on looks alone.

Sure you could, Dallion thought, but didnt say it. Given Dis standards, having the inn packed was probably regarded as a poor result.

Youre learned a few new tricks, I saw. Both you and Skye.

Weve been practicing, the cloud fox said flying off Diroh and onto Dallions head.

Ruby didnt seem to appreciate the effort, but remained stoically still and silent.

I had to after the mess you put me in, the girl replied.

Normally, Dallion would expect a pout or, at the very least, a frown. Instead, he got a smile. Life with Hannah had definitely polished Dirohs character, even if he could feel the same rebellious streak emanating from her.

I needed to level up just in case anyone came looking. There was a slight pause.

What level?

You cant ask that.

Youre right, Dallion said, taking a piece of fruit from the bowl that was just brought to the table. I dont have to. I can see your level and all your traits. I just want to know how you level up that much so fast. He bit into the fruit. It tasted like lemon melon. Did you use awakening shrines?

At first. Hannah told me to boost up as quickly as possible. A wave of guilt came from the fury, but she refused to look away. After that, it was easier.

Easier? Dallion tried not to laugh.

Clearly, shes a faster learner, the armadil shield said. That and she started with fewer flaws. Going through a lot of the issues early in life tend to make people resistant.

That was true, only up to a point. Diroh had a taste of hunter life well before Dallion. The trauma caused by the magic gem must have made an impact, though. Of course, there was one other possibility.

Who taught you? He went directly to the point. The lack of immediate response told him everything he had to know. Adzorg, he shook his head. Did he give you an echo?

What does it matter? The furys tone changed. Thanks to the sound canceling air currents she was maintaining, though, no one in the street even noticed. I got help, and it was useful! Or did you expect me to wait till you got back so I could improve?

Something like that. Dallion didnt blink an eye. The Academy will be a better place for you, especially now.

Seriously? Diroh crossed her arms. I spent weeks convincing Hannah that you werent some jerk that would appear and whisk me away, and what do you do ten minutes after we meet? Way to prove my point.

Itll be safer there. The countess didnt bother with you because she had her sights on other things. Now that the conflict is over, and youve leveled up so much, people will start noticing.

And thats a bad thing? You didnt seem to care when you worked at the inn.

I was an idiot. Dallion didnt raise his voice one iota, but the phrase had the same effect as if hed shouted it out to the entire city. You dont have to go through what I did, he wanted to add.

March helped me, Diroh said.

It was obvious she was lying. There were several ways Dallion could get to the answers. The Academy had provided him with both the tools and the knowledge. If he resorted to that, though, hed lose one of the things hed come for. It was a simple choice: Diroh or Adzorg. Neither option was guaranteed, but what was certain was that he couldnt have both.

Is she in the city? he asked calmly.

I dont know. Maybe. Theres no reason or her

Go to Hannah, he didnt let her finish. I have a few things to finish, then Ill come join you.

Youre impossible. You think you can just take me out of the city and drop me off somewhere like last time? You care more about your gear than you care about people! Picking them up, then tossing them aside as you go on your way.

There it was part of the fury he remembered. Unlike her sister, Diroh was really bad at hiding her emotions, even now. The only difference was that she did it in a slightly more polished manner.

When you tried to spy on me, you made yourself known. Hiding at Hannahs is no longer an option. You can try, but someone else will come to take you. The only choice youre left with is do you want to go with me or with someone

There was a sudden gust of wind, after which Dirohs seat was empty.

else. Dallion finished.

You definitely havent lost your touch. The armadil shield sighed. Were you planning on being so bad?

Shell go back. Dallion continued eating. She knows she has no choice. In a way, Dallion had made sure of that by returning to Nerosal. Hundreds of eyes were focused on him. One way or another, word of his actions would reach the appropriate ears.

No choice leaving the city, Vihrogon clarified. She doesnt have to join you.

No, she doesnt. Dallion finished the bowl. He was just about to leave when a small procession of clerics approached.

Dallion looked up at them, then shook his head. He didnt expect theyd be the ones to show up. If anything, he expected the general to send one of his furies and remind Dallion of the debt he still owed. This changed his plans a little.

The Seven be with you, Initiate, one of the clerics greeted him. The bishop has requested to see you.

The bishop? Dallion remained seated. Sounds important.

On closer look, he saw that it was. Despite wearing the attire of simple temple clerics, everything, from their stance to their weathered skin, made it clear they had seen more than a few fights in the wilderness.

Just a cordial invitation, the woman continued. You have his assurance that it wouldnt take long.

It never did.

Alright. Dallion stood up. Im long overdue on my chat with the Moons, anyway.

The provocation was noticed, but not reacted on. To some degree, Dallion hoped that it would. That way, the local bishop would be on the defensive.

Im being arrogant, Dallion thought.

One of the things his parents used to tell him back on earth was not to ruin everyones day just because he had a bad day of his own. It was easier said than done. When it came to it, Dallion had had a really crappy year. If Nil were around, hed tell him that he had to stop pissing off people before he ran out of people to piss off. However, one of the advantages of being a mage was the ability to do so, and breaking the habit was getting difficult.

Walking along the familiar streets, the group of clerics escorted Dallion to the citys main temple. It was bigger than he remembered, still surrounded by crowds of people. Regardless of what happened in the wide world, there would always be those who wished to obtain an awakened status or increase it.

Crowds meant nothing to Dallion, who was quietly escorted in through a side entrance. Most of the clerics remained outside, blocking the path should someone else try to squeeze in. That left Dallion with only two of the original procession.

The Order has done quite well for itself here, Dallion said, looking at the large statues that decorated the corridor.

Were only assisting with the transition until the new lord mayor takes his place.

So, you know who it is as well, Dallion thought.

The Seven look kindly on all those beneath them. We are only following their will.

And which of the three sides will you help the most? Dallion asked. He didnt get an answer.

Soon he arrived in a large antechamber. The rich decors were enough to make a minor noble envious. The amount of raw magic metals alone was enough to equip a squad of awakened in full sky silver armor. IF he had to guess the countess had been quite generous to the Order before her promotion.

Please, wait here, the cleric said. The bishop will be with you shortly.

Dallion nodded. It would have been nice if there was a marble bench or seat he could use. There was always the option to lean against one of the statues of the Moons, but he chose not to.

Sensing Dallions annoyance, Ruby flicked his wings.

Easy, little buddy, Dallion whispered. Were not here to break anything. Gem, keep an eye on Di, he added mentally.

Yes, boss, the familiar replied.

With a yawn, Dallion made his way to the statue of Felygn. The sculptor had depicted the Moon in all its glorya benevolent dryad surrounded by plants and animals. That tended to be the modern consensus regarding dryads and empaths. Of course, no one bothered to mention how devastating either could be.

Are you being cynical again? the armadil shield asked.

Trying not to, Dallion replied.

After a few more seconds, he moved to the statue of Astreza. The blue moon of awakening stood majestically in the center of the antechamber. As the Moon of Awakening, it was considered to be the center of the pantheon and first among the deities. It was also the Moon that had cursed Dallion.

Still no chance you can tell me what I did wrong? Dallion asked.

As expected, the statue didnt answer. Dallion was just about to add that any hint would be appreciated when a deep blue glow appeared beneath his shirt. Considering the time and place, it was tempting to take this as a sign. However, Dallions experience as a mage told him it was something very different.

Quickly, he took a glowing artifact out from under his shirt. Within the blue glow was a single purple dot with three circles surrounding it. Dallion felt like laughing. Hed spent a large part of the last six months roaming the world and had barely come across anything magic related. Now, his vortex detector indicated that an active vortex had emerged beneath the very city.

#### Chapter 754: Deals and Curses

Nerosal had always been the center of attention. Relatively close to the fallen south, it had also been the copyette capital of ages past, not to mention one of the two major sources of ancient artifacts in current times. Its distance from the Imperial capital had delegated it to a backwater city to banish nobles to, but that apparently hadnt affected things beneath the surface. The level-three vortex was just another example, posing the question of how many more had there been back before Dallion had obtained his magic trait.

Know anything on the matter, shield? Dallion asked as he put away his aetherizer.

Wouldnt surprise me. The dryad mentally shrugged. Mages barely visit this dump. I doubt any detector has been a thousand miles from here.

As a mage, Dallion knew that the opportunity was too good to mix. As a hunter, this was the worst time and place to get involved. With the power vacuum, the more he got involved, the more complicated it would become for him elsewhere. Some might even think he was making a play for control of the city, which could be interpreted in all sorts of ways, and as Dallion had seen firsthand, mages had been banished for less.

The faint sound of steps quickly brought Dallion back to the here and now, reminding him he still had an annoying bishop to deal with. At least the vortex wasnt located beneath the temple. Thank the Moons for small blessings.

A massive wooden door opened on the far side of the antechamber.

The bishop will see you now, Initiate, a large cleric announced. Judging by his size, he could probably smash through the stone walls with his bare fists. Looking at his battle scars and high level, he probably had.

In a casual stroll, Dallion walked past into the bishops quarters. The room was twice as large and even more lavishly decorated, combining Moon motifs with fanciful gifts from the local nobles. All of them were impractical and useless, but expensive enough to ensure that they wouldnt be kept on display. In some ways it was like entering the generals office, all that was missing were the cages of exotic creatures.

Lord bishop, Dallion said, doing his best not to grumble as he entered.

Barely had he done so then the door closed behind him. It was at that point that he got a glimpse of the man behind the desk. Dressed in the richly embroidered clothes that depicted his station, the mans skin was as white as the garments themselves.

Cleric? Dallion blinked. This was definitely a day for surprises.

Nice to see you again, Dal, the albino responded with a reserved smile. Still magic, a mess of things.

The man was the first member of the Order that Dallion had seen upon awakening. Back then, he had been assisting in a regional chainling hunt. Within the years, they had become acquaintances, to the point that Cleric had offered Dallion protection back when he was chased by Countess Priscord.

Youre the bishop?

It was difficult to believe that someone banished for not obtaining a spellcasting skill would make it so far. A disgrace both to the noble of his domain and the Academy, Cleric had been forced to enter the Order to survive. The Moons had undoubtedly treated him well.

No one in their right mind wanted to be in charge of this powder keg, the bishop replied. Especially knowing that its your backyard.

It never was my backyard. Dallion shook his head. And even if it were, that was a long time ago.

So you deciding to drop by so soon after the archduke left is purely a coincidence?

I had a few things to take care in the province. Dallion continued towards the massive desk. As he did, he looked around in search of a seat. Same as in the antechamber there was none. Nerosal just happened to be my first stop.

Im sure it is. Cleric leaned back. You can cast spells, by the way. It wont affect my sensitivity.

Thanks to his vision, Dallion was able to see that the albino had a magic trait, even if it was at zero. That suggested that hed been to the Academy, and also that he had given away his magic to someone else; rather, that he had been forced to do so. Taking the magic from someone who couldnt use it sounded exactly like a decision an Academy snob would decide on.

Im fine. Dallion stopped a few feet from the desk. So, why am I here? I take it you didnt want to talk about old times. Am I in trouble again?

You know the answer to that, the bishops tone hardened. But no, I didnt call you to discuss your issues. Not when there are bigger things at stake.

Im already taking part in the war, so if thats what

A new Star is on the rise, the bishop interrupted. Normally, Dallion would respond with a comeback, but this news was enough to send shivers down his spine.

He had always known that sooner or later a new Star would emerge. That was how this world went. Not a small number had escaped the downfall of the previous Star, going into hiding. And even if

one was to assume that the Order had managed to sniff all of them out, there were just as many outside the Tamin Empire.

Who?

Too early to say. Some say that the Star will appear in the east, some say that hes already the head of the Azure federation. All the rumors are highly unreliable and a means to inspire one side or another. However, a new Star is coming. That much is certain.

I take it were not talking about the distant future?

Months. The albino nodded. The candidates have already been infected and now its just a matter of them succumbing to the void.

And I thought the war would be my greatest worry, Dallion thought.

Such things are usually related, the armadil shield said from Dallions realm.

The Order has been sharing their fears with all sides for months.

Let me guess. Dallion frowned. No ones doing anything about it.

Oh, they are. Even bitter enemies dont want to become the next banished race. Still, all their actions must be done behind the curtains, while the war is front and center.

Sounds about right. So, why tell me? You think that the next Star will target me?

Thats a given. Cleric slammed on the ground with his foot. Dallion was able to see several of the threads vibrate with increased intensity. A line formed from the albinos position, a spot next to Dallion. Moments later, the floor itself rose up, forming a crude seat. Please sit down. Youre making me uncomfortable.

Still familiar with the basics, I see. Dallion obeyed.

Most that is known regarding matters of the Star is kept secret, but Ive been told a few things. This comes from the Archbishop himself. Cleric cleared his throat. His hoarseness had gotten a lot worse than Dallion remembered. Usually, the Star candidate is established in advance. The unfortunate soul chooses to embrace the void on their own accord, transforming into the evil thats mentioned in all the history scrolls. Supposedly, that approach takes time, which is why there are decades or even centuries of calm between Stars. However, every now and again, there are events that nudge things forward. When that happens, there are more candidates than one, each determined that they are the rightful choice.

Events such as massive wars?

In this case, no. It would have happened even without the wars. In fact, it would have happened even if you hadnt killed the Star.

Im glad that someone thinks highly of my efforts Dallion said beneath his breath.

Which brings me to the reason youre here. The bishop ignored the comment. The person responsible for this is the same that youve been trying to catch: your old friend and mentor the Icepickers captain Adzorg.



There were many things Dallion thought he knew about Adzorg. Between the memory fragments, Nils slips, and things he'd been told at the Academy he had created the image of an obsessive archmage who liked to experiment with too many things he wasn't supposed to. It was a fact that the old man had been fascinated with things from Earth, to the point he had tried to create a device that allowed someone to walk from the awakened world there directly. Yet, never had he imagined that the mage might go so far as to have dealings with the Star cults.

He's not part of the cult, Dallion said firmly.

He doesn't have to be. He's still working on that device with this. Not only that, but he's been perfecting it, gradually gathering pieces.

That old Cold anger swept through Dallion, yet despite that, he didn't let it show. There was one principle when dealing with anyone: even when interests aligned, one could never be sure they were getting the whole truth. Will you vow that everything you said is the truth?

I vow by the seven that it is, the bishop said without hesitation.

So, all the times he sent hunters on missions, it was to gather parts for his device? Not to mention that was what he used Dallion for while he was in the Academy. Difficult to believe.

That's because you assume that he wants to create a new Star. His obsession has nothing to do with that. A glimmer of uncertainty emanated from the bishop, barely caught thanks to Dallion's music skills.

Can anyone tell me more about this? Dallion asked all guardians in the room. Most remained silent, but as it was common with items, there always was one which was just a bit chattier than usual.

The bishop also told him that it was a mistake, a low-pitched ring said.

Quite ironic that the only item willing to share this information happened to be the bishop's ring of office. With empath's being gone for so long, no one in the Order had considered silencing something as cherished. Dallion had little doubt that teams of awakened had put precautions in place to keep the temple from blabbering. Most likely they had gone through every item in the room, including every garment of the people inside. Not the bishop's ring, though.

I bet you've seen a lot, Dallion thought.

The ring laughed politely, but didn't elaborate.

The Order knew about this, Dallion subtly added, a note of sadness in his voice. And still you didn't do anything about it?

It was estimated that his punishment would hold.

Dallion wanted to roll his eyes.

There were bigger problems back then. The Star was making appearances left and right. The Order was attacked left and right, cultists managed even to infiltrate our ranks. No one imagined that thing would go so far with his curse in place.

His curse? Dallion wasn't going to let that slip. What did you have to do with that?

Me personally, nothing. The Order in general everything. Who do you think erases names and delevels awakened? Not the Academy, I'll tell you that.

And yet, you come to me for help?

Not everything in the world revolves around you! Cleric stood up. It was my decision to loop you in! The power players were already involved. I just happen to think that you stand a greater chance of finding him before it's too late!

Silence filled the room. Based on the layers of anger emanating from the bishop, Dallion wasn't the only one having a bad few months. A major war was the worst of times for a new Star to appear. If Agzorg was such a focal point, dealing with him as quickly as possible would prevent a whole lot of devastation. Of course, it would come at a cost.

How? Dallion asked. How's Adzorg nudging things?

The contraption he thinks he's creating. It won't work. After the limitations placed on him, he's a tenth the mage he was. He doesn't have the magic or the mind to activate it, but he keeps trying. That was part of the punishment.

To always try, even if he's never able to achieve it, Dallion said. It had enough of Sisyphean logic to make it believable.

Somehow he still managed to make something that works.

Probably all the artifacts he's been freely storing up for years, Dallion grumbled.

What he's building will never take him to another world, but is bunching holes elsewhere. The bishop opened a drawer of his desk, then took a rolled parchment and tossed it to Dallion.

The piece of paper represented a map of the known world. No borders or countries were marked on it, just the general landmass of the world. Scattered throughout it were a vast amount of dots, some larger than others.

Vortex activity in the last decade, courtesy of the Academy, the albino said.

Vortex locations? They seem a bit out of date. There was an unusually high number in the vicinity of Nerosal.

When he started, Adzorg was only able to trigger a minor one every few years. He's gotten a lot better, especially after getting some of the devices from the Academy. The Archbishop fears that if he continues, he might create an opening to the void. It will be short-lived, but enough to elevate a cult candidate to the position of Star.

That's a bit of a stretch.

The prophecy is certain about one thing if Adzorg isn't captured, a new Star will rise and the human race will be banished.

Oh, just that? The armadil shield asked. And I thought it would be something serious.

Were not just asking you for help, Dal. The bishop looked him in the eye. Were asking everyone for help. Youve had his echo in your realm for years, millennia if you could, true time. Help us stop this.

Quietly, Dallion rolled up the map. If it wasnt for the Moon vow, hed have a hard time believing all this to be true. Unfortunately, there was every indication it was.

What will you do to him? he asked. If you catch him before, its too late. What will you do?

Thats for the Archbishop to decide. The most important thing is that he doesnt complete the device. Nothing else matters, not even the war.

The answer left no room for interpretation. Still, despite everything, Dallion couldnt believe Adzorg to be so stupid. If his device was creating vortexes, surely, hed notice.

Alright, Ill help you. But I have a few conditions.

#### Chapter 755: Within the Nerosal Ruins

Setting conditions to the Order of the Seven Moons wasnt a wise move in most circumstances. Being a mage somewhat put things on an even footing, though not quite. It was only when the request was so insignificant from the orders point of view that it didnt ruffle feathers. Depending on the circumstances, it could even be viewed as a positive.

Dallion had made his involvement subject to three conditions. The main was that no one outside of the order be made aware of the deal. This was seen as reasonable from all sides and immediately guaranteed through another Moon vow. The second was free access to the copyette ruins beneath the Nerosal. If nothing else, that was the location of the magic vortex. Regardless if it was related to Adzorg or not, Dallion wanted unfettered access to it. Given events in the past, the request posed a bit of alarm, but was ultimately fulfilled.

The last condition was a bit trickier. It had taken a lot of convincing, but ultimately, Dallion had managed to obtain another vow that upon the successful completion of his mission, Adzorg not be killed. In addition, the Order would help Dallion remove his own curse, or at the very least tell him how to do it. Since they had experience in the area, it was unlikely to present a problem. On his part, if Dallion failed to stop the rise of a new Star, hed be facing greater issues than the Orders bad side.

None of Dallions guardians said a word as he made his way to the citys arena. In truth, he himself wasnt thrilled to be going there. That was a place that the general frequented, and the man was still owed one favor.

I wont be visiting him, Dallion said, sensing the tenseness within his realm. Besides, Im a mage now.

You know as well as me that he wont let that stand, the armadil shield said. You wont be the first mage to owe someone favors, making him a lot more eager to collect.

There was no denying that. As a precaution, Dallion cast an invisibility spell on himself as he entered the arena. With the festival over, and unlikely ever to occur again, the place had become alarmingly empty. All the Priscord family banners had been removed, along with many of the

statues and portraits. One could get the unmistakable feeling that this was a foreclosed building awaiting new owners.

A few city guards were scattered about the vast corridors, just in case someone unwanted tried to steal anything of value that was left. Sealed doors and stairways ensured that no one could freely venture into the lower areas, but for a mage that didnt present any challenge. Even without flashy or destructive spells, Dallion had picked up a few ways to enter a place without the use of doors or other openings.

Upon reaching one of the entry points, Dallion drew his harpsisword and tapped it on his boot. The blade vibrated, allowing him to seamlessly stick it through the wall, then extend his magic to create a magic portal on the other side.

Youll need more if youre going after the mage, Harp said, her voice a combination of vibrations that formed words.

I know. Dallion completed the spell, then pulled the weapon out. Thats why Im heading for this vortex. He needed to increase his magic trait as many times as possible, and that meant absorbing every vortex he came across.

A second portal formed on the wall, allowing Dallion to walk through into one of the old stairwells. From there, he continued downwards.

Darkness was complete. Even with his present perception level, it was impossible to see a thing. In the past, Dallion had used Lux to light the way in such circumstances. This time, he chose to rely on another spell.

*Youre relying too much on magic,*

Ariel criticized from Dallions domain.

Maybe. Dallion replied. From his view, he wasnt relying enough.

The descent continued for another ten minutes. Then, finally, the modern staircases ended and the ancient glory of the copyette ruins began. There were many things that could be said about the imprisoned races at the height of their power. Pan claimed there was nothing that could rival a copyette city. Of course, he tended to be a bit biased on the topic. Seeing his share of ruins during his time as a hunter, Dallion had witnessed the majesty of many forgotten wonders of architecture. If he had enough time he would have gladly roamed through what was left of the ruined city in an attempt to recreate it in his mind. Sadly, his focus wasnt anything built by copyettes, but the vortex that had appeared there.

After another minute walking through chambers and corridors, Dallion took out his aetherizer and looked at it. The purple dot appeared close.

Its in the middle of the next corridor to the right, boss, Gem said. Dallion had offered to make the aetherfish the guardian of the device, but Gem had refusedhe enjoyed exploring the real world too much to be stuck in another realm.

Less than fifty steps later, the purple glow of magic became visible. It was just as Gem had said or rather, close enough. While part of the vortex was indeed visible in the corridor, its main part happened to be in a small room leading off of it. Dallion tried to look in, but the magic intensity was too high for him to see a thing.

Looking closely at the outer threads, Dallion was able to read a small part of the magic instructions, most notably that the vortex had ceased to exist over a month ago, possibly even three.

Afterglow, he thought.

Just as powerful vortexes gleamed before they appeared in the world, after images were also present long after the fact. One significant detail was that afterimages could allow a mage to absorb the tower as if it were the real thing.

Ready? Dallion asked.

The vertex was different from the ones hed seen before. Back in the Academy, he was dealing with lingering concentrations of magic energy. This had the appearance of a tower very much like the one during his failed awakening trial.

Ruby, slash the walls.

The shardfly flew off Dallions shoulder, sending a small tornado of wind slashes. Sections of the walls crumbled, revealing more of the vortex.

As Dallion suspected, the vortex had the general shape of a tower. The threads of the outside formed a solid impenetrable surface, at least for everyone who didnt know where to look.

Stop, Dallion said after a while.

If Nil were here, he would have said that destroying a tunnel while still in it wasnt the best of ideas. Thanks to Dallions scholar skills, he was able to make an adequate assessment of the situation. It also helped that he was constantly splitting the entire time.

A few of his instances examined some of the newly revealed parts of the vortex. In one case, Dallion tried placing his hand on the magic tower with the hope that hed trigger a response. No such thing happened. Even so, it soon became clear that every seventeen thousand and six hundredth thread was visibly dimmer than the rest.

At least its not the top, Dallion thought, then infused his harpsisword to slice a sliver of an opening.

## **VORTEX AWAKENING**

The familiar purple rectangle appeared. The moment it was gone, Dallion found himself on a floating chunk of rock beneath a purple sea above.

**You are in a level 4 VORTEX**

**Defeat the guardian to Absorb the VORTEX**

An upside-down world? Dallion wondered. Glancing at his shoulder, he saw Ruby still there. That suggested that at least gravity was normal for the moment.

Cautiously, Dallion split into two instances. Some vortexes were temperamental and didn't react well to combat splitting. The moment he did, a wave formed on the sea above.

A bird of blue flames emerged and after making several circles round him perched on Dallion's free shoulder. Ruby flicked his wings. Vortexes were the only places in which Dallion's realm and real world guardians could interact effortlessly, sometimes leading to the occasional grumble.

Check for anything suspicious, Lux, Dallion said. Don't fight. I don't want any mess-ups like last time.

With a loud chirp, the firebird darted off, disappearing from view.

Harp, Onda, anything you can tell me about that?

Neither of the guardians replied. For some reason, whenever a question was presented to both of them, Onda would remain silent unless Harp responded first.

Harp? Dallion asked again.

I can't give you advice, the nymph replied.

That, in a way, gave Dallion his answer. Just to make sure, he took his harpsisword and did a spark infused point attack straight up. Force shot out from the tip of the weapon, as a white beam within the realm of purple. The moment it hit the sea, a vast amount of water moved aside. A hole briefly emerged, though it was short-lived; the volume of magic water wore down the force of the strike until it had no further effect. Loud splashes filled the created space, sending ripples throughout the sea in the form of giant waves.

*Send an echo to check out the water*

, the armadil shield suggested. *I know your thoughts on the matter, but it's the safest way.*

Ignoring the advice, Dallion cast a flight spell and slowly flew up. He strongly suspected that there was some trap laying in wait. Either the ocean itself was going to react to him, or something beneath it. Even with the differences between types of vortexes, that principle never changed.

Knowing that he remained safe in the air, Dallion burst into instances. Waves covered the entire sea, raging as if a massive storm had begun.

One single instance of Dallion increased its speed, flying faster towards the surface. Over five hundred feet away, the reaction everyone was expecting took place. Spikes of water shot up like tentacles, aiming to pierce the instance. Before they got a chance, Dallion ended it, choosing another to become reality.

So, that's your game, he said.

The sea was nothing less than a barrier shielding the vortex guardian. In order to reach his destination, he had to somehow puncture it and move to the space beyond.

Lux, Dallion thought. Have you found anything?

There was a loud pop a few feet from Dallion marking the firebird's return.

Nothing, boss, the familiar replied. Id say send little bro to check out the water. Hes good at this.

Im sure. Jellyfish were at home in water. However, with Gems level still so low, Dallion didnt want to risk it. It didnt help that he remained uncertain how the creature was supposed to level up. Originally, he thought that feeding it magic would do the trick. That hadnt been the case.

Focusing on the water, Dallion this time combined his magic and layer vision. Surely enough, the appearance of the sea changed. No longer was it a monolithic liquid, but millions of magic threads, a fraction of the size of a human hair. Interestingly enough, they didnt have any firm connections to anything, but were freely moving about attaching and detaching at will.

Concentrating harder, Dallion tried to spot any anomalies or thread instructions, but his current level of magic prevented him from doing so. After half a minute, slight tension emerged in Dallions temples.

Harp, he said, closing his eyes. Without giving any advice, is there an easy way through this?

Yes, the harpsisword replied. But not for you.

I thought so. Dallion opened his eyes. Despite his many tricks, he was going to have to rely entirely on magic. Still, that didnt exclude combining it with any of the other skills he had.

Unsummoning his weapons and gear, Dallion extended his internal magic. Minuscule threads emerged from every part of his body, surrounding him like a defensive mesh. Now he had a layer of defensive skin, very much like a platypain. That was just the first part of his plan.

What exactly do you intend to do? Harp asked from within his awakening realm.

Have a violent swim, Dallion replied, commencing a new spell. A violent swim in the worlds largest potion.

#### Chapter 756: In a Sea of Magic

Nil used to say that even the greatest challenge became simple once the logic behind it was unraveled. At the time, the old echo was referring to awakening trials, but vortexes were surprisingly similar. Given enough resources and information, even life could be treated in the same fashion. Dallion had a while to go before reaching that level. The current vortex, though, was a different matter.

Creating potions wasnt an easy experience. Aside from everything else, it required a good understanding of nymph magic methods and the ability to perform them. Thankfully, Dallions randomly esoteric interests had prepared him for such an eventuality.

After his protective layer of magic threads was complete, he approached the sea. Same as before, a dozen tendrils shot out in his direction. Summoning his thread splitter dagger, Dallion sliced the tips off, encasing the free elements in aether spheres of his own. That was another thing about magicit always went towards those that were stronger. One careless move and even a high-level mage might have his magic stolen, by a creature, rival, or even the vortex environment itself. However, with enough skill and ingenuity, the opposite was also true.

One by one, the bubbles of captive magic were consumed, then released again, only this time forming an entirely new set of spells.

Swords? Onda asked. Thatll hardly work.

Think of it as a meat grinder, Dallion replied. All he needed was a makeshift drill to let him make his way through the sea. Having his own liquid spells fight the rest of the sea was only going to grant him a bit more time. Between that and the protective magic layer, it had to be enough.

*No, I mean it wont work. The moment you*

Let him learn his own mistakes, Harp interrupted. Her tone was calm, even pleasant, but it had the effect of lightning from a clear sky. Its the only way he can progress.

Thanks for the vote of confidence. Dallion kept collecting magic threads for a few more minutes, then did another point attack. The start of a tunnel opened up on the seas surface. Quickly, Dallion threw all of his liquid spells inside, then followed. Same as before, the mass of the sea attempted to fill in the void, but this time it was hindered by the liquid wall of swords.

## **VORTEX BREACH**

### **Overall stability 99%**

Spells clashed against each other, filling the air with hundreds of purple rectangles. The damage was minuscule, and still a constant reminder of the eternal struggle between invader and realm. It was no wonder that mages were so cutthroat: there was only one thing certain upon entering a vortex: someone was going to absorb the other. The Academys main role was to teach novices how to survive.

Just like hunting, Dallion thought. On the other hand, he had never been the typical hunter. When it came to vortexes, there could be no offer of draw or surrender.

Twisting around, Dallion performed another point attack, drilling further into the sea. The number of rectangles doubled. Meanwhile, the size of the hold was reduced by half. The amount of spells Dallion had poured in seemingly cast initially was now wearing thin.

Maybe you should have spent a bit more time fathering threads, the armadil shield said.

Its all a formula. Dallion did another point attack. If the stability of the tunnel is decreased, I just need to go faster.

All of his instincts shouted for him to split into instances, or at the very least create a few echoes to help in. His wisdom told him not to. All he had to do was remain calm. The emblems and artifacts he was wearing ensured that he'd be ejected from the vortex. Of course, there was never a guarantee. The higher the vortex level, the greater the danger it posed.

Summoning his hammer, Dallion did a double point attack, up and down, to keep the tunnel collapsing above him. He had gone so deep that the opening was the size of a coin.

I told you itll work, Onda, he said with a touch of glee. Its all logic and magic principles.



No sooner had he said that than a mass of magic pierced through Dallions wall of spells, ending up in the tunnel. Believing his wall of swords to have been breached, Dallion unsummoned both his weapons and cast a new series of spells to plug the hole. That proved to be a mistake.

## **MODERATE WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 20%**

What the heck? Dallion pulled back, summoning his harpsisword again.

Five feet away, the mass of magic had changed into a creature.

## **VORTEX MINION**

**Species: AETHERCORN**

**Class: MAGIC**

**Health: 0% HP**

**Traits:**

- **BODY 20**
- **MIND 20**
- **PERCEPTION 20**
- **REACTION 20**
- **MAGIC 40**

**Skills:**

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **ENTANGLE (Species Unique)**
- **RAIN OF BLADES (Species Unique)**
- **CHARGE (Species Unique)**

**Weakness: HOOVES**

A unicorn? Dallion deflected the creatures next attack with his weapon.

Looking at it, the minion was no different from a bladicorn, only created entirely out of threads of magic.

Tried to warn you, old man, Onda said from his realm. Vortexes adapt. You make a counter, they counter your counter.

Dallion was too busy fighting the creature to respond. Magic adaptability was well known. Having loose threads spontaneously create a creature, that was something new. No doubt there was some tome describing the theoretical process in vast detail. Seeing it in practice, though, was a lot.

Without wasting any time, Dallion flew down, then infused his harpsisword with spark, as he did an upward strike. Knowing what such a creature was capable of, his only course of action was to kill it as before it could start casting spells. The difficulty was not destroying his own spells in the process. For all the power of point and line attacks, they were going to do as much damage to Dallions own spells, resulting in him winning the encounter, but losing the overall fight.

The aethercorn quickly caught on, moving away and to the side of the tunnel. As long as it increased the distance and remained close to Dallions wall of blades, it would have the upper hand.

**Sneaky bastard. Dallion cast several aether barriers.**

Magic symbols covered the minions entire body. As they appeared, Dallion went through all the memorized spells in real time. Normally, he could tell easily what someone was casting once several of the major symbols had formed. In this case, the creature planned to create an aether explosion. In the real world, Dallion wouldnt even bat an eye. Explosions were a lot less efficient against mages as one might think. Here, though, things were different; the minion wasnt targeting him, but the wall of blades itself. If there were an explosion, the entire tunnel would collapse, leaving Dallion to rely on his second skin.

A new aether barrier appeared next to the aethercorn, then shoved it into the wall before the spell could be completed. The threads representing aether blades in liquid form mercilessly sliced into its body, causing the being to lose stability. The entire form burst like a popped balloon, spilling magic threads everywhere.

The moment Dallion saw that, he knew that his time was running out. Although inefficient, the vortex had found a way to breach his protective barrier. The only solution was to pass through the sea before the overall collapse.

**Want a boost, boss? Lux asked. The firebird knew better than to assist uninvited.**

**No! Dallion said firmly, casting a new flight spell. Return to my realm.**

Several more breaches occurred along the tunnel. Aethercorns emerged in front and behind Dallion. Some attacked him directly, others started casting spells to weaken the tunnel. At this point, dealing with them was an impossible task. Still, Dallion did several more point attacks, clearing out as many as possible. Unfortunately for him, that didnt prove to be a lot. The minions were both fast and intelligent enough to keep to areas that were difficult to hit. Only the ones that attempted to outright block Dallions progress ended up being destroyed.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion started casting the flood spell. It was a move that verged to desperation, but the only thing that could help him right now. Within seconds, the portal emerged, then vanished behind Dallion. With a bit of luck, it was going to keep the minions occupied a bit longer.

Behind him, the top of the tunnel collapsed. The threads he had used to create his wall of swords was too thin to coat the entire space created by the point attacks. The purple sea splashed in, mixing with the water coming from Dallions portal.

## MODERATE WOUND

### **Your health has been reduced by 20%**

Another alicorn managed to stab Dallions leg with its horn as he flew by, effectively halving his health.

Leave the vortex, Harp said.

I can do this. Dallion had unsummoned the hammer, focusing on doing point attacks forward, while using his left hand to boost his speed. Im close to the end. I can feel it.

*Youre not ready for this vortex. Youre close, but you still arent there yet.*

I am. Dallion insisted. It wasnt that he had become complacent, but the last few months his progress had crawled to a stop. He might have learned a vast number of magic symbols and spells, but his magic trait remained at twenty-three. There was no way he was giving up a level four vortex, especially this one. I am there, he whispered.

Purple water kept seeping in. The top of the tunnel had completely collapsed. Spells created by vortex minions darted past him. Some even made contact, repelled by his protective layer of magic threads.

Just a few seconds more, Dallion said, more to himself than Harp.

He had been going through the sea for quite a while. As far as distance was concerned, it had to range in the dozens of miles, if not more. While space in any magic realm was an illusion, there was a limit to how much something could be stretched. Sooner or later, the sea had to come to an end.

Ruby, create some wind, he ordered.

Keeping firmly to Dallions shoulder, the shardfly flicked its wings, sending a flurry of wind slashes forward. This was by no means an elegant way to breach the tower, but as long as it worked Dallion had no intention of complaining.

Further and further down he went. His speed had increased to the point that he couldnt see new aethercorns emerge. And yet, it all kept on going. It seemed that he had entered a bottomless pit. The sensation of doubt emerged. Was it a good move to keep persisting? If he quit now, would it all go to waste? There was no telling how long the vortex would remain. Maybe it would last for a few more hours. If he was lucky, it might appear again in another week or so.

No! Dallion told himself. If he couldnt complete this, what chance did he stand against Grym and the traitorous battlemages? They had accumulated their magic for decades. If he didnt take advantage of every opportunity presented to him, he might as well become a clerk at the Academy.

Point attacks kept pushing the tunnel further and further down until suddenly they didnt. It only lasted a fraction of a second, but Dallion was able to catch it. The devastating amount of force had been effortlessly pushed to the sides, like water being poured on a mirror.

That was it the end of the sea. Dallion had finally reached the solid barrier. At this point, hed usually take the time to find a weakness, then slice through it and create a portal leading to the other side.

With time being a luxury he didn't have, Dallion resorted to the second best thing. Increasing the number of point attacks, he cast the magic depletion spell he had learned from Raven.

Lightning shot out in all directions, instantly ending Dallion's flight spell as well as causing all magic threads to pull back.

Shield! Dallion summoned the armadil shield. Cocoon me! He performed one final point attack with his harpsisword.

The armadil shield expanded, becoming a metal sphere around Dallion. Half a second later, the impact tossed Dallion to the inside of it.

## **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 5%**

## **BREACH ENFORCER**

**(+2 Body)**

**Inertia and the force of will helped you breach into the towers core. You were lucky you didn't go splat.**

Chapter 757: Magic Devastation

Open, Dallion whispered once he cast a new flight spell.

The metal sphere opened up, returning the armadil shield to its normal state. Given the multitude of vortex minions that had formed in the sea, one could expect a greater variety of far stronger creatures here. That turned out to be true. Yet, none of them seemed particularly interested in Dallion. Rather, they were roaming the air, focusing on an entirely different type of prey chainlings.

Not this, Dallion thought.

Rising twenty feet in the air, he split into half a dozen instances. As expected, the smooth purple surface that was the endless floor erupted in a series of spikes. Several of them almost managed to reach the feet of his instances. Seeing that their prey was out of reach, then quickly drew back, vanishing within the surface. At least this was one less concern Dallion would have.

Unfortunately, there was no time to relax. The other side of the sea proved to be a battleground. Towering blobs of black void floated like caterpillar teeth and tendrils floating all over their surface. The lack of emotions emanating from them was so absolute that one could almost say that they were draining that of the onlookers.

Back at the Academy, Dallion had been told that one of the mages duties was to protect the world from unseen creatures trying to enter the world. So far, he had assumed that meant beings such as shardflies, platypains, maybe the occasional cloud creature or two. Never had he expected that this was the method through which void beings entered the world as well.

Aether spiders the size of trucks flew everywhere. Mercilessly, they plunged their sharp legs of pure magic into the black blobs, simultaneously bombarding them with as many spells as they could master. Individually, Dallion could probably win in a fight against them. If only a dozen grouped up on him, it was all but certain that they'd be victorious.

If Nil were here, hed probably get into a long and boring explanation, presenting the event from a purely theoretical angle and conveniently forgetting the practical aspects. Thankfully, after half a year, Dallion had gotten to know a thing or two about life and awakening. The only thing that the current scene reminded him of was a realm invasion.

In a way, this presented a huge opportunity. The vortex minions were preoccupied with the chainlings, so he could take them out one at a time without fear of them focusing on him. From a logical perspective, hed never get a better chance. Would that be worth risking chainlings entering Nerosal again?

Was that how cracklings appeared in the world? Mages focusing on their own advancement while leaving others to take care of their mess?

A chainling exploded, as the cluster of aether spiders covering it managed to drill through. Lesser blobs of void floated about, quickly melted down by spells of flames and energy.

Dallion gritted his teeth. There was no way hed let the chainlings get anywhere close to the real world.

Ranged markers appeared on one of the less mobile specimens. The size of his native village, the creature floated in the air, keeping the vortex minions at bay. Not being overly aggressive worked in its favor only a dozen or so aether spiders were engaged with it, most of the rest focusing on more immediate threats.

Ruby, slice anything that gets near, Dallion said, as he infused his harpsisword with spark. Chaining or minion. He let out a point attack, targeting the center of the chainlings body.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt has been increased by 200%**

The wave of energy hit the creature dead center, puncturing a small hole. The wound was quickly filled up. Even with spark, Dallions present attacks werent as efficient as hed hoped. Similar strikes had destroyed entire crackling villages in the realms, they had even wounded chainlings. This wasnt either. It shared chainling properties, but it was a lot more primal, larger, and less intuitive.

Halving the distance, Dallion did a line attack. This proved a lot more efficient, creating a giant cut across the chainlings side and killing off a few minions in the process. One more strike and the being was slit in two halves. That wasnt the end of it, though. Just as Dallion shifted hands, ready to continue with his attacks, tendrils shot out from both halves of the creature in an attempt to merge them together again.

Not yet, Dallion whispered. In the past, he would have cut the tendrils with his next strike. Instead, his strike split each of the halves in two.

Unsummoning his weapons and gear, Dallion then quickly cast a series of aether shield spells. Purple rectangles appeared in force all above the creature, then thrust it towards the floor.

There was a loud, thundering splash. Thousands of inhuman screams filled the air as aetherspikes pierced through the surface of the blob.

## **VORTEX BREACH**

## Overall stability 94%

The black matter squirmed as it bubbled away. The scars it dealt to the floor were massive, but Dallion didnt have neither the will nor the desire to keep observing. Instead, he flew towards the next closest chainling.

Before he could get close, a series of wind slashes shot out from his shoulder. A cluster of purple rectangles popped up next to Dallion, as an aether spider attempted to get close for an attack. Apparently, his last attack had elevated him to the degree of vortex threat as well.

Thanks, Nox. Dallion cast a multitude of aether spheres around the attacker, quickly summoning his weapon.

One strike was all it took for the spider to break through its encasement. Two of its legs darted in Dallions direction, while the rest drew magic symbols in the air, casting a series of spells.

Dont! Dallion said, although he still did a line slash to disrupt the spells. One of the minions front legs hit him in the shoulder, though thanks to his layer of protective magic threads, no red rectangle emerged. The chainlings are a greater threat!

If the minion was able to understand him, it didnt act it. Even worse, several more creatures broke off from their usual targets, flying in Dallions direction.

One against three. Even with combat splitting, Dallion didnt like such odds. Bursting into enough instances as he could muster, he flew in away as fast as possible while simultaneously attempting a host of spells and attacks. For the most part, his efforts were adequate. In over eighty instances, he had managed to kill off one of the aether spiders. In one case, he even managed to destroy two, but the outcome wasnt particularly in his favor. The last remaining vortex minion had successfully copied his method of attack, sending him to the floor, where the spikes instantly depleted his health.

Sorry, Harp. Dallion changed the way he was holding the harpsisword. Im out of options.

Focusing all his concentration in one thought, Dallion combined music skills with magic. Threads of magic spilled into the weapon, flowing through the strings. Then, when he played a chord, they flew beyond. Like thousands of minuscule streamers, they filled the air, attaching to anything that was capable of hearing them.

Dallion had taken the pains to match the music to the aether minions, focusing on their magic frequency. To his surprise, the music threads also stuck to the void blobs. For a fraction of a second, everything froze. It reminded Dallion of the first time he had used music on objects. Back then, the targets were of such a low level that they got paralyzed by the contact. Since then, Dallion had faced many stronger opponents, but never had he reinforced his music with pure magic and, to be honest, it was no accident. The sensation was painful, making him feel as if all his internal organs were stretched to infinity.

A second wave of magic spread along the connections of sound, this one coming not from Dallion but the harpsisword itself.

*Finish the spell,*

Harp said.

Dallion didnt need telling twice, playing a series of chords. Each cluster of sounds was the equivalent of magic symbols linked together in a spell formation. The closest thing one could compare it to was an air potion.

Thirteen chords played. Thirteen symbols combined. Thousands of creatures burst open like corn kernels, filling the space with black and glowing dust, along with a seemingly endless number of purple rectangles.

## **MUSIC DEVASTATION**

**(+2 Reaction, +2 Body)**

**You should have died combining these skills. Good thing you have someone looking out for you. Next time, you might not be as lucky.**

A single blue rectangle appeared among the purple.

Lux, Harp said. Grab him.

As far as anyone could remember, this was the first time the guardian had ordered a minion. Even so, there wasnt a moments hesitation. The firebird emerged from Dallions realm, wrapping him in blue flames.

Thanks, Dallion whispered. The single spell he had cast had put an end to every other active spell he had, making his entire body feel as cold as ice. Only the flames warmth kept him from trembling uncontrollably.

You overextended yourself again, Harp criticized. On a real battlefield, that would have been your end.

Dallion didnt reply. There was a time when she had said the same about line attacks. He had to admit, though, that music spells were tremendously more taxing. And just as before, if it hadnt been for her help, he would have failed at it.

Holding his breath, Dallion attempted to split into instances. No matter how hard he tried, he found that he was incapable. The lack of red rectangles was encouraging. At least he hadnt suffered a self-inflicted status effect.

Lux, Ruby, is there anything left? he asked.

Nothing, boss, the firebird quickly replied.

Unlike him, the shardfly made the effort to flutter about before giving a negative answer.

Nox, do you feel anything?

Im not setting foot in a vortex. The crackling puma hissed from his realm. And no.

That was a relief. At least Dallion could take a few moments to regain some strength. On the negative side, he still had the vortex guardian to face.

Ill be fine, he said, aimed at Harp. If this hadnt worked, Id have resorted to the Moonstone.

That isn't the point, she replied with the calm and warmth of a mother. You're not facing guardians anymore.

As seconds passed, Dallion started feeling warmth return to his body. Slowly at first, it allowed him to move his fingers, then hands, then everything else. After close to a minute, he felt as if he'd been hit by a moderately large truck. One minute more and it was closer to being hit by a bicycle. In all that time, there was no sign of the vortex guardian.

It's not your job to attack me, it's my job to defeat you, Dallion said, moving his arms around. Same as before, he made an attempt to split and this time he succeeded.

Dallion's first thought was to try to use a magic spell again and find where the guardian was hiding. His second was to find an alternative approach.

Not making this easy for me, are you?

Casting a spell to enhance his perception further, Dallion looked around. With the fight over, the entire realm had been reduced to an infinity of purple and black. From what was written in the Academy tomes, vortex guardians had to be linked to the vortex they belonged. Once exceedingly terrifying possibility was for the guardian to be somewhere in the sea.

After thinking about it for a few moments, Dallion dismissed the idea. Following the presented logic, the vortex was at its weakest at the bottom, consistently getting more and more challenging further on. If that held true, the current space represented the shell that kept the chainlings from infiltrating the world. That would mean that the strongest element—the guardian and heart of the vortex—should be higher still.

Where are you hiding? Dallion wondered.

Splitting into forty instances, he flew in all directions. Magic nature was based on math. If he found the center of the room, he'd have a starting point to go by.

Ruby, let me know if you feel any illusions. It might

Dallion stopped mid-sentence. One of his instances had found what he had been searching for: a barely visible thread of magic that rose up from the floor, continuing up into the darkness.

If this were a common guardian, Dallion might have made a sarcastic remark. Since it wasn't, he infused his harp's word with spark and did an arc attack aiming to sever the thread.

The blade of the harp's word struck the thread but moved no further.

Purple light bled from above, shattering the darkness.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

### **Chapter 758: Banished Guardian**

The vortex guardian slowly descended from the sky. A lot closer than Dallion imagined it to be, the being was still several dozen miles in the darkness, only visible as a partial orb of light; partial because some of it had been severed off. The voidlings he had faced had probably been much stronger than the chainling blobs, capable of breaking off chunks of light from an otherwise perfect sphere.



Thank the Moons, Dallion thought. Harp had been right that a one-to-one fight was a bit beyond him. The battle damage, though, changed everything. There had been a time when Dallion had faced the minion of the Purple Moon and the Star at full strength. Like now, the two peaks of power had focused on each other, gradually tearing themselves down to the point that he could effectively face them and even win. At the time Dallion had seen his actions as clever, now that he had gained a bit of force, he saw them as cowardly and also as a warning not to underestimate lesser opponents.

Have you ever fought one of those? Dallion summoned his armadil shield.

The dryad guardian gave a reply, but Dallion found himself incapable of hearing it. With the vortex guardian no more than five hundred feet away, his actual form had become visible within the glow, and it was nothing like he had expected.

### **VORTEX GUARDIAN ACACIA NILATON**

**Species: HUMAN**

**Class: MAGIC**

**Health: 17%**

**Traits:**

- **BODY 40**
- **MIND 40**
- **PERCEPTION 40**
- **REACTION 40**
- **MAGIC 40**

**Skills:**

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **ACROBATICS**
- **FORGING**
- **SCHOLAR**
- **SPELLCRAFT**

**Weakness: HEAD**

Human? It took some effort for Dallion not to take a step back.

During his many travels through the realms, he had seen all sorts of guardians: insects, creatures, artificial constructs, members of the three banished races, feral or not. Not once had he heard of humans being banished. The worst that could happen to the free races was to get placed in a prison item for a number of decades, get delevelled, or have their awakening powers sealed. Banishment was used to describe someone chased out of a province of the empire itself. And yet, there was no denying the proof in front of him.

The vortex guardian was of a woman in her twenties. Made entirely of purple light, she was wearing what had been light armor of the same material. Her left shoulder was missing, along with the entire arm. Even so, there was no indication that she was in pain. For that matter, there was no indication she felt anything whatsoever. Just as Dallion wasn't able to sense normal emotions from void creatures, the only thing he was getting from her was a constant sound of static.

In preparation for the fight, Dallion split into sixty instances. He was half expecting the guardian to do the same. She didn't.

Glowing eyes with barely a hint of humanity glanced at Dallion, after which the guardian darted towards him, sword in hand.

Dallion parried while the rest of his instances spread out, each casting a different spell. When it came to magic damage to one instance could well deal damage to all the rest. The blade of magic slammed into his harpsword and stopped. For a fraction of a second, surprise became visible on the guardian's face, as if she expected for the attack to pass through.

Spells rained at her from all sides, passing through as if she weren't there.

Instances can't harm her, Harp said. You must stick to reality only.

Similar to what Nil had done, Dallion thought. Actually, the similarities between the last awakening trial and the current vortex were too many to be mere coincidence. Vortex towers, void presence, even the echo's ability to avoid attacks seemed more like a warning of things to come. The only problem was that like most warnings sent by the Moons, they were only visible in hindsight.

Magic symbols appeared all over the guardian's body, like glowing tattoos. There were too many for Dallion to make out the possible spells they would create, which was why he went on the offensive with a spark line attack.

A third of the symbols faded out as the rest cast a series of aether barriers in front of the guardian. Ever multiplying, they shattered as quickly as they were created, though in the process managed to delay the strike for just long enough for the guardian to block it.

The mage principle held true even with the impressive trait values, the guardian remained a spellcaster, not a fighter. Her initial attack was supposed to be a certain hit magic wasn't restrained by the physical. The guardian probably expected her blade to go through the harpsword.

Ruby, Dallion said as he rushed forward with another line attack.

Wind slashes combined with the thread of destruction.

## **MINOR STRIKE**

**Damage dealt is increased by 10%**

A hit. It wasn't much, but it confirmed Dallion's suspicions. Lacking one arm, and a lot of health, the guardian could only rely on secondary methods for casting spells, making her vulnerable to fast-paced disruptive attacks.

There's no need to fight, Dallion said, adding slowness into his words. He knew that a guardian of her caliber would never fall for a music attack, but as things stood, every little bit was to his advantage. Were both human, after all.

The music strands snapped long before they reached their intended target. However, his physical attacks kept her on the defensive. No longer seen as invulnerable, the guardian didn't appear as threatening as before. Now she was closer to a low-level noble: powerful, yet with just enough weaknesses for one to take advantage.

## **MINOR STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 10%**

Another of Rubys wing attacks managed to sneak through, reducing the guardians health to fifteen percent.

The voidlings must have done a number on you. Dallion unsummoned his armadil shield. He no longer needed that arm to defend himself; a lot more could be done by casting spells.

The harp's word slashed half an inch from the woman's torso. If he got a bit better, the fight could end right away.

Acacia is a nice name, Dallion pressed on. Aether projectiles shot out from his left hand, following an elliptical path to their target. Similar to Rubys attacks, most were negated by the guardians defenses, but a few managed to pass through, stacking up three red rectangles. I didn't know humans could be banished.

You must have done something pretty terrible to deserve such punishment, he thought. Was it related to the Moons? Is it a curse?

My task is an honor, the guardian said, her voice high and echoy very much like the combination of sounds that Harp used when talking to Dallion. And I'll keep doing it after this fight is over.

With seven percent health left, that sounded a bit optimistic. There was no way she could win at this point, no way for her even to manage a draw. Dallion's greatest fear was that she'd perform an explosive spell in an attempt to take him with her. Yet, the guardian persistently continued casting protective barriers and on occasion tried to counterattack in the moments between Dallion's line attacks.

One could tell that she was trying to analyze his combat pattern. Her own, though, was somewhat off. The style was generally outdated, although it was difficult to tell for certain since she had only one arm to work with.

Why aren't you fighting closer to the floor? Dallion wondered.

The deadly spikes emerging from it would have provided her with a definite advantage. The magic of the vortex wasn't capable of harming her. For that matter, why had she fought the voidlings in the air?

## **MINOR STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 10%**

One percent life. A single strike was all that kept Dallion from achieving victory. It was tempting to let up a bit and give himself some slack. In the past, Dallion would have probably done so, allowing himself a brief conversation with the guardian. Now he knew better. The all-out attack was the only reason he hadn't received any damage in the last fight. If he gave his opponent a chance, he might end up on the other foot, granting her the means to eject him from the vortex, or even worse.

Sorry, Dallion said, following up with a multi point attack.

Aether barriers shattered in the hundreds. No longer to keep up with the attacks, the stacks thinned, then disappeared altogether.

### **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 200%**

### **VORTEX GUARDIAN has been defeated.**

The purple rectangle emerged, marking the end of the fight. All magic spells cast by the guardian abruptly vanished. She, on the other hand, remained there.

Without hesitation, Dallion quickly places his left hand on her forehead. This was it, the moment every mage waited for. Dallion had found the hard way that, as difficult as dispersing a vortex was, it never came with a guarantee of absorption. Unlike awakening, mages were owed nothing they had to take it.

Magic threads came out of Dallion's fingers, then pulled hers in. A surge of power went through his body, filling him up with energy.

### **You have assimilated the GUARDIAN's magic, increasing your magic trait to twenty-seven.**

As Dallion's magic increased, that of the vortex dwindled. The threads composing the floor melted away, transforming it into a wireframe construct, then even they were gone, leaving Dallion in the Nerosal ruins corridor, a foot above the ground. All the gear he had started with was on him once more, as was Ruby. However, there was something different about the shardfly. There was a faint glow coming from its red wings. Also, it had slightly grown in size.

You leveled up, Dallion said in surprise. Good job.

From within his realm, Nox meowed, annoyed. Having to constantly deal with magic had prevented the crackling from leveling up. The only consolation was that Dallion had used his newfound abilities to grant it and the other inhabitants of his realm with new skills.

Joy, pride, and a sense of achievement emanated from Ruby. The creature flew a circle round Dallion, then went back to its spot on his shoulder. A few moments later, its wings reduced in size.

Illusion? Dallion asked.

Partial, Ruby replied.

The shardfly was definitely following in Gleams footsteps.

With the vortex gone and once Dallion had cast a new light spell the inside of the room was visible. Similar to everything else in the ruins, it was mostly empty. The difference was that the few things that remained were items of a lot more modern nature and definitely something that most people wouldn't normally use.

Parchment, quills, small shadowtech devices Dallion had no idea what they were supposed to do. Despite a vaguely familiar Earth design, they remained alien, as if someone was copying foreign technology and guessing how it functioned.

Clever. You made these during the festivals, Dallion said. All those times that Adzorg pretended to hide away from the festivals, he was actually here, working on his grand device. As a former mage, he might even have had an agreement with the lord mayor to explore the ruins in search of dangerous devices, vortexes, or Moons know what else. Even so, he was a bit careless leaving this behind. Someone with a bit of knowledge would have easily seen the magic symbols on the paper.

Anyone here? Dallion asked.

The items seemed to have been placed there before he'd arrived in the city. There was no way that Adzorg would fear them talking to anyone. Unfortunately, there were no responses. The old mage had covered his tracks yet again. The only clue that he left was his work.

One by one, Dallion gathered all pieces of paper, writing materials, and strange devices. There weren't many of them. With no engineers in the world, it was going to be difficult to make anything out, especially since they were considered failures to be left behind.

What are you thinking? The armadil shield asked.

A few things. Dallion examined one of the devices closer. No larger than a lighter, it was made of multiple pieces of metal alloys containing sun gold though no gears or obvious power source. And, while the world was unfamiliar with concepts regarding electronics or advanced engineering, someone in the Shimmering Circle might.

Chapter 759: Living Hurricane

This is somewhat nostalgic, the armadil shield said.

Walking through copyette ruins? Dallion's opinion differed. Hardly.

*You patched up things with Eury here, I remember.*

The comment made Dallion slow his pace. That was indeed true. The first time their relationship had been on the rocks, searching the ruins had helped patch things up. It also helped that the entire city was under threat of destruction.

There's nothing to patch up, he said adamantly.

*Right. It's the world that's keeping you apart.*

Reaching the staircase to the city above, Dallion hastened his pace. Half a dozen cleric guards stood at the higher levels, making sure no one without permission went up or down. Aware of the mages' authority, they quickly stepped back, letting him pass. Some of them mumbled the obligatory initiate title Dallion cared little about.

A second half dozen was placed in the arena corridor, just beyond the stairwell. Feeling in a good mood after his magic level up, Dallion was about to let them know that he was done, when he spotted something that made him stop. At the end of the corridor, surrounded by his ever-present fury bodyguards, stood the general.

Damn it! Dallion said to himself. He had hoped that he'd manage to leave the city without having to talk to the snobbish snake. If there was someone he wanted to avoid at all costs, that was it.

What a pleasant surprise to find you here, Dal, the general said with his superior smile. Dallion's rank in society might have increased since the last time the two had spoken, but it didn't matter. He still had a debt to pay, and if there was one thing the general was good at, it was collecting. Or should I say mage Dallion?

Nice to see you too, General. Dallion remained calm. I was considering seeing you, he lied.

For a moment, he considered whether to blow him off completely. Being a mage, he had the authority to do so. Sadly, in the short term, that would create more trouble than it was worth.

Delightful. I'd invite you to my usual room, but it's being redecorated. The general tapped his chin with a finger. I decided to go with something a lot more imperial in mind.

I see.

On the other hand, the arena field is empty right now. Maybe we could have a brief talk there?

It was made to look like an amicable invitation, but there wasn't a person in the corridor who couldn't tell it was a threat.

The countess was moved out of the city, and yet this squirmy toad remains behind? Dallion grumbled internally. Worse than a cockroach.

Leaving his furies behind, the general went along the halls and corridors to the arena field. Despite it and the stands being meticulously well kept, a sense of emptiness emanated from everywhere. There were times when it was filled with dozens of challengers and enough crowds to fill a medium-sized town. Dallion had seen it from both sides of the fence: he had taken part in the tournament as well as observed it from afar.

Feels strange, doesn't it? The general looked around. If there was one thing about the countess that everyone will miss, it's the Nerosal Festival. That was an event to remember. Even the northern provinces were envious, even if they'd never admit it. Tell me, is the Academy still holding its tournament?

No.

Ah, a shame. I was told that they, too, were rather magnificent. I've seen echo recreations, of course, but it could never beat the real thing.

Dallion remained silent, patiently waiting.

In a way, you can say that everything started here, the general continued. If a member of the imperial family hadn't died that day, none of the following calamities would have taken place.

Doubtful. Dallion tried his best not to smirk. Another excuse would have turned up.

Oh, thats definitely true. With the toys Adzorg had been playing, it was inevitable that something would follow. Who knows, if he had been just a bit luckier, the city might have been destroyed well before the Star had the chance to drag it into the wilderness. Makes you think, doesnt it?

What do you want? Dallion pressed. I dont have time for your usual performance.

My, my. The generals smile widened. I guess its true that magic makes one arrogant. But youre right. Both of us are busy people, so Ill get straight to the point. He paused for a few moments. I think I can help you.

Using that line already? Each time the snob had used it, Dallion had ended up worse off.

Everyone knows youre hunting Adzorg.

Not hunting, Dallion corrected. And I expect you to know where he is?

I havent the slightest idea. The man has managed to elude the Academy and the Orders best. Theres no way I could find him. However, I can help you find the thing he seeks.

Sounds too good to be true.

Everyone makes mistakes, even former archmages. The generals tone shifted. In this case, the mistake was made years ago. The old man had grown impatient and came to me asking for a specific item. It was believed to be difficult to find and impossible to get. In fact, I was planning to use you to find it for me. It was quite unfortunate that some of my other associates failed to do their part.

Let me guessthey ran off with the item in question.

Didnt even find it. Needless to say that our business relations came to an end. Anyway, the important thing is that Adzorg never got the piece.

And you know where it is. Dallion crossed his hands. What makes you sure that he hasnt found it by now?

Nothing.

The response made Dallion arch an eyebrow.

Ive narrowed down its location, but theres no guarantee that he hadnt found it. The reason Im assuming he hasnt is because the world is still here.

So, you have nothing to offer?

You seem to be confused, mage. Its you who owe me. The debt you have is guaranteed by your Moon vow. Ive been generous enough leaving you run around, but even my patience has its limit.

Dallion would hardly call what hed been doing running around. Unfortunately, he was the one with the debt.

Confident he had made his point, the general took out a small scroll from beneath his shirt and handed it to Dallion. Unrolling it revealed the picture of a very peculiar and well-crafted gear wheel. More precisely, it was a stack of gear wheels arranged like a cone.

The item is said to be the size of a large shield, the general said. Its made of a combination of sea iron, sun gold, and moon platinum. The materials alone will make every hunter want to have it. According to Adzorg, its hidden in a large clay or stone statue. Find it first and youll find your ex-mage.

Thanks, Dallion grumbled.

And just to be sure, there are no misunderstandings. I want the item.

Youre thinking of taking on the Order? Now Im impressed.

Dont act stupid, it doesnt become you. The item is useless on its own. Owning a piece of something that could enslave all humanity, though Now, thats priceless. Bring me my prize and your debt is paid. The man turned around. What you do with the old man isnt my business.

Dallion folded the scroll and added it to the pile of things he was carrying. This was exactly the sort of help he had expected. The only positive thing was that he could be fairly sure that Adzorg had at least one piece missing.

Oh, one last thing, the general said over his shoulder. Some of my associates were convinced that the statue is located in the dwarf kingdom of Alor, or at least it had been before the poison plague broke out.

The kingdom of Alor. From what Dallion could remember, that was a small kingdom relatively close to the empires northwest province. The issue was that it was also close to the Azure federation.

I wish you the best of luck. The snob waved.

Mentally Dallion clenched his fists. A single spell would be enough to reduce the general to cinders. And yet the Moon vow wouldnt allow it.

*I told you to avoid the arena*

, the armadil shield said.

Not now, shield. Dallion hissed, then cast a flight spell. Even with all the positives he had achieved in the last hour, the conversation with the general left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. How could someone be so arrogant to gamble with the fate of cities? He had practice, that was for certain, constantly relying on someone else taking one for the team and dealing with the consequences of his actions.

The flight to the Gremlins Timepiece lasted less than a minute. As he approached, Dallion instantly spotted several air currents coming from the inn. Living under the countess had taught Diroh to be careful. That was good.

No longer bothering to remain incognito, Dallion flew directly to the inn door and stepped inside. He expected a crowd to start forming, but the place was remarkably empty. The only people present were Hannah and Diroh. Even Pan had remained in the kitchen, preferring not to get involved.



Take everything you want to bring along, Dallion said unceremoniously. Were leaving.

The fury stood up to protest, when Hannah gave her a sign not to.

Go, Di, she said in a calm voice. Only the things youll miss.

Youre letting him take me? Why? I thought

Just do it, Di. He might be a jackass, but hes rightpeople have already noticed and until we get a strong lord mayor, youll be safer with Dal than with someone else.

A bouquet of emotions emanated from Diroh. There was a lot of disapproval, anger, and rebellion, of course, but also a bit of eagerness and joy as well subtly hidden. Walking deliberately slowly, she made her way to her room. Dallion and Hannah kept looking at each other, not saying a word the entire time the fury was there. Once gone, the innkeeper drew a dagger from beneath the counter and slashed all the air-currents Diroh had forgotten behind.

If something happens to her the woman began.

I wont be alive to defend myself if it does, Dallion finished for her. Besides, shes learned a trick or two.

She only had a year. You had five.

Had it been five already? Dallion had lost track.

Ill make her my apprentice, he said. Once she has the title, no one will be able to harm her.

Other than all the mages that joined the other sides. Hannah returned the dagger to its place. Do you have enough authority? Shes not a full mage.

Shes close enough. Besides, Im owed a few favors. Shell become my apprentice, and with a bit of help from the Academy, a lot more.

For several long seconds, Hannah kept on glaring straight into his eyes, then shook her head.

I never thought you'd turn into this.

Thats not true. You knew it from the moment you saw me. Dallion glanced briefly at the kitchen door. I bet you knew how all of us would turn out. Is that part of your curse?

Heh. The woman grabbed a bottle from the nearby shelf, then poured herself a glass. My curse. She gulped it down in one go. They say that every awakened who lives in Nerosal but isnt born there has a curse. Mine was to help people I knew would move on. Eury, Jiroh, you

You still have Pan.

Only because his curse is even worse than mine. I didnt expect you to chase after Captain Adzorg like a pup of the Academy, but I knew youd hurt me. She filled her glass once more and drank it. And still, youre the safest bet that girl has. Pan doesnt think so, neither does March, but they dont know you as well as I do.

I bet you say that to every otherworlder.

When I look at you, I see a hurricane of change. Youll hurt a lot, more than you have hurt already. Youll scar the world itself.

In that case, why put Di under my care? Dallion felt a slight chill at the back of his neck.

Because as long as shes with you, shell be in the eye of the hurricane.

Chapter 760: Lanitol's Invitation

Vengeance took many forms. Diroh hadnt relied on pouting, sarcasm, or disobedience. Instead, she had made sure to drag everything of Dallions from the inn using air currents. Not only that, but she had made certain to spread out the items around her as widely as possible during their flight.

Dallion would have called the approach passive aggressive, had there been an ounce of pettiness emanating from the girl. Unfortunately, there didnt seem to be any.

The Academy isnt a place for pranks, he said. The battlefield isnt either.

Really? Di asked with the most charming smile. And where are you taking me first?

The Academy, he said without hesitation. Right after we finish something in Lanitol.

Whats so important there?

Politics. He sighed. I must congratulate the archduke on his victory.

But he lost. Diroh flew in front of Dallion. Countess Priscord kicked his butt.

The phrasing suggested that she had spent some time with Spike.

Thats not how he sees it. There was no point in going down this topic. There was nothing Dallion could say that the fury didnt already know. Unlike him, she was a born princess brought up by hunters. What skills did they teach you?

Didnt take you long to get to that. The fury floated away. Enough to take care of myself. Skyes also picked up a few tricks. Do you want to see her turn into a sword? Part of the cloud creature floated off the fury, taking on the form of a massive broadsword. Or maybe a whip blade?

On Dallions shoulder, Ruby flicked his wings menacingly. The intent was noticed by everyone, causing the cloud fox to move back to Diroh.

Itll help me know what to do. Dallion allowed himself a smile. And what to teach you if I cant.

I know the basic four, the fury said.

The basic skills were attack, guard, acrobatics, and athletics. There was nothing special about them individually, although having all four was nothing to be brushed away, especially since she hadnt been awakened for long.

And carving, she added.

Internally, Dallion wanted to scream. That was the only skill that he lacked of the twelve, making it a sort of a sore point.

What about magic?

Nothing new there. I can manipulate air and ice.

Just ice?

Technically water as well. I can use air to turn water into ice and then play with the ice, but not the other way around.

That was a pity. Dallion could have had Harp teach her a thing or two about water manipulation otherwise. By the sound of it, the ice power was more of a natural oddity than trait magic. There was every possibility that Di would never be able to increase her magic level, but as with everything else, there always were exceptions. After all, Dallion wasn't supposed to have learned magic either.

What about trait ability? Echoes, splitting, and all that?

Vend tried to teach me splitting, but I'm bad at it. I could manage two or three for a few seconds, but it's exhausting.

Worse than a child, Dallion thought.

Now you see what it's like for someone with predetermined limits, the armadil shield said. Sounds like her mind trait is capped. That'll be a challenge if she were to become a mage.

March taught me how to do a line strike, but told me not to use it too much. The fury thought for a few moments longer. That's about it. I can mend and improve items, of course.

Good enough. Dallion said, earning himself a displeased glare. I meant good start, he corrected himself. There was no denying that being stuck at the Academy had made him a bit antisocial.

What about you? she asked in turn. What can you do?

Everything except carving. Dallion put an end to the conversation. He had already spotted a few cloud bastions on the horizon. None of them were red, thankfully, but an increased patrol presence suggested that something was going on.

Casting a quick spell to enhance his perception, he focused on the distance. It turned out that there were four bastions in total. Each had several squads of furies, and also a few Academy mages. The green and cyan robes made it clear that this was more than a simple patrol. They were looking for something.

One of the bastions abruptly changed path, splitting off from the other three and moving in Dallion's direction. He had been spotted.

Di, he said. Move behind me.

What's going on? The fury looked in the direction he was staring.

Guard clouds. They're probably here to ensure the transition happens calmly, he lied. Keep your magic hidden, he whispered. And get Skye out of sight.

I thought that now that I was with you it wouldn't be a problem. As she spoke, the cloud fox shrunk to the size of a white marble.

We're not at the Academy yet.

Dallion turned towards the cloud, making it clear he wasn't avoiding them. Diroh followed. There was a sensation of tenseness coming from her, though no fear or eagerness. Hopefully that meant she wasn't going to greet the cloud the same way she had greeted Dallion.

Gently, the two groups approached each other. When the distance became less than a thousand feet, the cloud stopped, remaining still, leaving Dallion and his companion to fly to them. Over three dozen fury mercenaries were visible more than required for something this size. Sitting on the top of chairs of sea iron were a total of four mages. Three of them were the garden variety of battle mages that Dallion had gone on missions with. One of them looked vaguely familiar, though not to the point that Dallion could lead a conversation. The fourth mage was a few ranks higher. Although not part of the mage legion, she had the authority to order everyone except Dallion around.

Academy mage, he said with a slight nod, stopping five feet away from her.

Battle apprentice. The mage twisted her lips as she replied. I wasn't informed you had business here.

Nothing troubling, I assure you. I just wanted to make sure the province had returned to normal, and to find out a thing or two about Adzorg.

Ah, yes, he was banished to Nerosal, wasn't he? the woman said dismissively. I hope it'll help you catch him this time. And that is?

My novice. Dallion looked her in the eyes. I will present her to mage Katka.

That was enough of a warning to make her back off. The other mages remained silent, patiently waiting for the pissing contest to end so they could get back to whatever they were doing.

Is there anything I could assist you with? Dallion offered.

Assist me? The cyan robed mage sounded outright insulted.

I was a hunter in the area, so I know it quite well.

Ah, right. You didn't receive your trait upon awakening. Thank you for the offer, but no. We can take care of the matter on our own.

One of the battlemages shook his head, indicating it was better than Dallion stopped there. At the same time, he also discretely drew the magic symbol of binding so that only Dallion could see.

I see, Dallion nodded. They were chasing after someone, though not Adzorg. Were headed to Lanitol. If you're headed in the same direction we

Good day, apprentice, the mage cut him short. With a snap of her fingers, she indicated to the furies operating the cloud that the conversation was over. The cloud slowly turned around, then flew off to join the remaining three.

Charming, Diroh said once the cloud bastion was several miles away.

You'll get used to it, Dallin said. Anyway, it doesn't concern us. Thankfully.

*You're thinking about it*

, the armadil shield said.

Thinking about what? Dallion asked mentally.

*You're thinking of going after whoever they're chasing and taking Di along.*

That was the last thing on his mind. Maybe if he were alone, things would be different, though even then it would be impractical. The main thing remained the vortex tower. Knowing that Adzorg was connected was just a bonus.

The rest of the flight was peacefully uneventful. On one occasion Dallion spotted a griffin nest in a patch of ruins, but chose to do nothing about it. He'd had enough of ruins for one day, besides it didn't look like the creatures were causing anyone harm.

By late afternoon, the city of Lanitol became visible. Shining like a jewel in the wilderness, it made an effort to hide the scars the province had received. Dozens of layers of magic surrounded it like a bubble, adding to its glamor.

The city was a series of platforms stacked one over the other. Even from this distance, the Roman-styled buildings and statues were distinctly visible, creating an impression of grandeur. Last time Dallion had been here, he had entered the city from the ground level. Now, he intended to land directly on the top platform, as merited his position. It was also at this point that he regretted Di taking all his belongings along. That was going to become a topic of gossip for certain.

Ignoring any imperial bastions and city guard forts, Dallion flew on. He expected a mage to fly out and greet him before he got to the barrier enveloping the city. That happened soon enough, but instead of the city mage, it was an apprentice who emerged through a portal in the air.

Greetings, battle apprentice, a young man said.

He appeared to be in his late teens. Starstruck and bushy-tailed, admiration emanated from him like a bell. Unlike the majority of locals, he was light-skinned, with short brown hair and a plain round face. The clothes he was wearing were far more expensive than a common mage apprentice should have, suggesting that he was related to one noble family or another.

Let me welcome you to the provincial capital, the boy said. His glance shifted from Dallion to the fury.

Someone hasn't gone out much, the armadil shield commented.

My novice, Dallion said after several seconds of silence.

Of course! The apprentice straightened up in the air. My mage and the archduke are expecting you. Please, follow me.

The boy cast an eight-circle spell on a section of the barrier. The moment he did, an opening formed, allowing Dallion and Diroh to fly through. If Dallion had to guess, that was based on the local mages' instruction. It would have been just as easy to cast a portal that would take them to the archduke's main hall directly. Sadly, there were still those in the Academy that didn't appreciate the latest reorganization changes. As far as they were concerned, Dallion was a no-good upstart. Of course, the only reason they could do so was because their position ensured that they'd never see war first hand.

This won't take long, Dallion told Diroh, loud enough for the apprentice to hear. Once we're done, we'll head straight for the Academy.

The flight was painfully slow. Its purpose was to impress Dallion with the wealth and power of the archduke, which was precisely why it had the opposite effect. The strong pretended to be weak while the weak pretended to be strong. No one would say it openly, but Lanitol was the loser in the recent civil war. The only reason he had kept his province was because the former Countess Priscord had let him have it.

Has there been any activity I should know about? Dallion asked as a distraction from the boredom.

Everything is always flawless in Lanitol, the apprentice gave the rehearsed answer. There will be a banquet in your honor. That might be considered new.

I dont think well be staying for that long.

But but the apprentice stuttered. You must. The archduke has personally organized it and

Im sure well come to some understanding, Dallion said, using his music skills to calm the boy down. Making a scene before the first meeting was considered bad manners.

Will it be like this everywhere you go? Diroh whispered, more amused than anything else.

Seems so. Dallion sighed.