

## Leveling up 761

### Chapter 761: An Item's Warning

This way, please. The young apprentice flew to the side of the archdukes palace. A cluster of several three-story mansions was there, surrounded by several well-kept layers of orange bushes. All the buildings were exquisite, even if nowhere as large as the palace itself. These had to be the guest residencies; either that or the staff quarters.

Casting a spell, the mage opened the large double doors. Before entering, though, he landed on the ground, patiently waiting for Dallion and Diroh to pass first. In contrast, Dallion remained an inch from the floor at all times. In the short time he'd been a battle mage, he had developed the habit of avoiding contact with unfamiliar surfaces.

A tailor team is expecting you in your chamber, the apprentice explained. I wasn't aware that there would be anyone accompanying you, so it will take a short while for the second one to arrive and tend to your novice.

Tend to me? Diroh asked with a predatory smile. That's so thoughtful of you she looked at the boy, indicating she expected to get a name.

Calpex, he quickly said. Apprentice Calpex Lyan.

Yes, how very thoughtful of you, Calpex. I can see why you were made an apprentice.

The insult passed over the apprentices head, who mumbled something in thanks, then quickly flew off, likely to inform the mage and archduke of the guests arrival. Wasting no time, the fury closed the door.

You've become vicious, Dallion said, amused.

I've always been. You just never noticed. Diroh placed all of Dallion's floating belongings in the corridor. I know his type.

No doubt she did.

How are you with nobles? The banquet won't be the same as a hunters tavern.

So you're really planning to go?

The fury made it sound as if she disapproved, but the emanations from her told a completely different story. She was eager to see the inside of an archdukes palace. The more Dallion looked at her, the more he found the scruffy fury he'd met way back to be gone. Awakening had that effect on people, changing their perspective of the world, infusing them with curiosity, and helping them deal with deep-rooted flaws.

Going yes, he said, making his way through the corridor to the first ornate double door. Staying, no.

The room was his personal bedroom, as expected. Large and richly decorated, it had thick carpets woven out of gem cloth, massive paintings with such detail that only someone with a perception of forty could truly appreciate, as well as several large tables, chairs, a desk, and an impossibly large bed. Four people were there waiting for him, their appearance combined with the racks of cloth suggested they were the tailor team Calpex had mentioned.

Greetings, mage. All of them bowed. Interestingly, all of them were human. Given the city's size, Dallion would have assumed there to be a gorgon, or at least a dwarf as well. Will you allow us to take your measurements?

Without a reply, Dallion floated to a spot in the room, a few steps away from the large window, then raised his arms sideways. Taking the hint, the tailors quickly started taking measurements. There were no conversations the entire time. Everyone knew precisely what they had to do, occasionally asking Dallion to move certain parts of his body so they could get a more accurate measurement.

Do you have any specific preferences? the head tailor an old man well in his sixties asked.

Make sure it fits with my robe.

The man froze. The tailors looked at one another as if Dallion had made a death threat.

The archduke has not allowed such an option, the tailor said after a while. Only mages are allowed to have robes, and although you are

Fine. Dallion had no intention of arguing. Just make it clear that I am one.

Of course. And the young lady?

Dallion was tempted to casually mention that she was a princess, more as a poke to her than anything else. In the end, he wasn't able to keep himself from doing just that.

Make sure to illustrate that my novice is a princess.

Several of the tailors looked at the fury.

A genuine fury princess, Dallion added. The wave of anger emanating from Dirohs calm surface let him know that he had done his job.

You're getting your sense of humor back, the armadil shield said.

Did I ever lose it? Dallion asked mentally.

*Do you really want me to give you an honest answer?*

Dallion was just about to respond when the dryad guardian continued without giving him the chance.

*Didn't think so.*

Watching the tailors perform their craft was both fascinating and pitiful. Able to see their stats, Dallion knew their level was well in the fifties, along with the skills to match. Each of them individually would have the strength to defeat armies, fight monsters, even take down a chainling if provided with the necessary equipment. Instead, they spent their time making clothes based on the archduke's whim.

The colors chosen for Dallion combined blue, purple, and cyan, with a little bit of black here and there. The end result was formal, yet simple: a standard set of deep blue gem thread trousers and a vest to match, combined with a long-sleeved cyan shirt. The boots were dark purple, matching with his short cloak. Definitely not a combination he'd consider or even find suitable, but looking at the final result in the mirror, there could be no doubt that it was eye-catching.

By the time Dirohs group arrived, Dallions tailors were finishing up the final touches, adding a few decorative elements here and there. It didnt skip his attention that none of them had examined any of his weapons.

No changes to my gear? he asked.

The head tailor shook his head.

Afraid not, a new voice said from the far corner of the room.

Looking in the direction, Dallion saw a new person standing there: a tall male figure dressed in an expensive black outfit with a domino mask covering half of his face. Two things were notable about the newcomer: he was someone Dallion had met before, and his hair was platinum blond.

The archduke prefers that the only weapons at the banquet are his.

Overseer. Dallion wasnt certain whether he was supposed to nod or not. In the end, he chose not to. I would have thought that mages are exempt.

A logical assumption, thus completely wrong.

Not to mention absurd, Dallion thought. Spellcasting allowed him to summon his weapons with ease, not to mention cause more devastation than he could with his harpsisword.

I dont make the rules. I just make sure theyre enforced.

The tailors quickly finished with the final touches and left the room, leaving Dallion and the overseer alone. No sooner had they done so than the door vanished, transforming into another part of the wall.

Champion, then hero, and now mage. The overseer smiled. You really have no limit.

Id like to think so. Dallion kept posing in front of the mirror, checking out the final design of his outfit. It was flawless, even if completely impractical. Lux, he said.

The bladebow rose up into the air, then carefully examined him with the kaleidovristo sight. Not finding any lingering echoes or anything else alarming, the weapon then descended onto one of the small tables.

Any other warnings? Dallion asked.

Im just here to escort you and your novice. Nothing more.

A-ha. Dallion wasnt convinced.

Youve been here before, so you know how things work. Ill be outside when youre ready. The door to the room re-emerged. One final thing. Itellas also here. The overseer vanished.

Itella? Dallion thought.

That was one of the archdukes children, though not a particularly capable one. Dallion had clashed with him twice. Once he defeated him during the Nerosal Festival tournament, and the next right

here in front of his father. There was no doubt that the noble held no warm feelings towards Dallion, but it was absurd to think he'd go against a mage.

I'm not playing your games, Dallion said, glancing at his weapons. Nothing stopped him from taking a dagger just in case. On the other hand, there was something better he could do.

Keep an eye on each other, Dallion folded his own clothes then arranged them on the bed. While doing so he took ruby and placed it on his shoulder. The shardfly's new illusion powers helped him blend in perfectly, taking on the form of a shoulder button.

Gathering his thoughts one final time, Dallion left the room. To his surprise, Diroh was already there, dressed in a long gown that sparkled as if made of snow. White and cyan combined, creating the appearance of ice and crystals, but that was not all. The tailors had taken the pain to add some jewelry to the ensemble: rings, arm bracelets, as well as a tiara. Dallion also noticed that the fury had added an accessory of her own: a necklace composed of large, flawless pearls.

Told you to keep her hidden, he sighed, casting a masking spell on the cloud creature.

Hey, Diroh pulled away. There's no need for that. The pearls are just fine as they were.

In all truth, they probably were, but Dallion didn't want to risk there being a device or otherworlder that could see that the cloud fox wasn't from this world.

Put my things in the room, please, he said.

Why? I think they're fine where they are? Air currents took Dallion's belongings one by one and stacked them neatly away, as requested.

With a nod of approval, Dallion proceeded to go outside.

The overseer accompanied the pair to the grand stairway leading to the palace. Three pairs of marble statues rose on both sides, an homage to the previous archdukes of the Lanitol family. And just as before, one of them remained half destroyed. The reason, from what Dallion had been told, was that those who didn't have the power to prevent a civil war did not deserve to remain unpunished. It was interesting to see whether the same principle would be applied to the current archduke's statue. Most probably not.

It's rather nice, Diroh said, admiring the craftsmanship as they passed.

It was better last time, Dallion whispered.

How many noble banquets have you been to?

Just one.

During his previous visit with March and Eury, crystal shardflies had filled the air, directing the guests to the entrance. After what had happened at the Academy, it was understandable why Archduke Lanitol would prefer to avoid having them. Hopefully, he had only cast them out of the city and not killed them.

A few steps before the entrance, Dallion suddenly stopped.

Anything the matter? The overseer looked over his shoulder.

No, Dallion lied. Didn't expect the nostalgia to hit me.

In reality, he had found what had been bothering him ever since arriving to the city. The place was too quiet. With the level of his empathy trait, there should have been thousands of guardians eager to have a chat. Some should have remembered him from last time. And yet, he couldn't hear a single voice: neither creature, plant, nor guardian. If he didn't know better, he'd almost think he was in the middle of the wilderness.

The archduke is waiting, the overseer reminded. There'll be more nostalgia inside.

A dozen yellow-clad servants were present once Dallion entered the palace lobby. Last time, one of them had made sure to snobbishly tell Dallion the rules of proper etiquette. With Dallion being a mage now, all of them bowed without a word, letting him pass.

Enjoying yourself? the overseer asked, leading the way.

A bit, Dallion replied. I take it I'm to be in the main hall this time?

The overseer chuckled.

Dallion was just about to make some snarky comment when a voice sounded in his head.

Careful, an item guardian whispered. They're out to get you.

#### Chapter 762: A Death Banquet

Mage Dallion Darude and novice! A loud voice boomed before Dallion could determine the source of the item.

Damn it! He thought. Of all the times that the archduke's snobbishness could erupt, why did it have to be now?

Four fury guards stood to attention at the hall's entrance. Everyone's eyes focused on Dallion. The crowd was rather impressive, composed of several hundred people, all dressed in their most illustrious clothes. Fury guards were everywhere, giving the atmosphere a distinctly military vibe. And yet, it was obvious that everything was just a hollow facade. While still important, less than half of the people were nobles. There were no representatives of any other archduke families, even the neighboring ones. Members of high-powered guilds and merchant organizations had taken their place. Most notable of all, there was no imperial presence whatsoever.

With a diplomatically acceptable smile, Dallion made his way along the length of the hall, straight towards the elevated section where the archduke's throne was. Power still emanated from the man, but now the sense of boredom was replaced with tiredness. The man who at one point Dallion thought capable of shattering mountains with a single punch now seemed like a wounded lion struggling to maintain the appearance of his former glory. Even worse, everyone in the hall seemed to know it. They were smart enough to know they'd never survive a direct confrontation, so instead they were patiently waiting for the moment a new archduke would emerge. The emotions of the Linatol family were especially turbulent. Several of the immediate members were considering how soon they could make a go for the position, while the rest were ashamed they had fallen to such a level.

Noble problems, Dallion thought.

A thin elderly mage in a deep blue robe stood a few steps from the throne. Dallion hadn't seen him before, but could tell by the magic emanating from the man that he was powerful and probably important. Dark-skinned with almost entirely purple eyes, he had the Lanitol emblem embroidered on the upper right section of his robe, suggesting that he was related to the family in some fashion.

Everyone's here, a whisper said among the crowd.

Dallion fought the urge to combat split in an attempt to find the source. He knew that it was an item, though a different one than that which had warned him moments ago. Also, this one wasn't talking to him, but to someone else. Unless there was another empath right here, right now, that suggested that the item had an ancient guardian.

Stopping ten feet from the throne, Dallion bowed.

Archduke Linatol, he said. The archmage commends you on your victory.

The Lanitol mage snorted. It wasn't that he found the lie amusing, but rather disapproved that Dallion was the one talking in the name of the Academy.

Dallion Darude, the noble said with a semi smile. Better known as the battle apprentice. I heard you were instrumental in dealing with three rogue mages.

That was false. Dallion had taken down six and assisted in the capture of a few more. Of course, no one counted the first three since that occurred before the mage legion was established. Also, two of those three were children.

We learned that you went through Nerosal before joining us here, the archduke continued. Is there a reason for that?

My apologies, archduke. I was eager to try and find more about the one who got away. He paused for a moment. And also to claim my novice.

There were a lot of ways the conversation could have continued from there, most of them bad. Fortunately, the archduke remained blinded by his own ego.

Maybe you can help me as well. Seems that several mages have tried their luck going against me. Some steal from me, others come to my land to hide out, thinking that I wouldn't notice.

This almost sounded like a threat directed at Dallion. Thanks to his music skills, though, he got the impression that it related to someone else.

A rogue had the gall to venture into one of my ruins and proclaim them theirs. I would have gone deal with him myself, but Nerot convinced me this is a matter for the Academy.

We take care of our own. The mage nearby nodded in agreement. Although I don't see any reason the battle apprentice should refuse.

My owner will take out the three by the column, an item said. From what Dallion could make out, it was a knife.

The bows in the courtyard are on our side, another voice said. They won't hit their target.

*What about the apprentice? Hes an empath?*

Internally Dallion froze. This wasnt a case of items talking to each other! The discussion was between echoes! Combining magic with music in the Nerosal vortex must have triggered something, allowing him to listen to them as well. Thats why he was only hearing bits and pieceshis ability remained underdeveloped.

Battle apprentice? the mage asked.

Of course, mage Nerot, Dallion quickly replied. He didnt like the situation he was in one bit. Even the appearance of using magic in front of the archduke could be viewed as an insult at best and treason at worst. Why wasnt the overseer noticing anything, though?

Splendid. The old man grinned. Ill be sure to discuss matters with you later in the evening. Maybe after the auction is over.

You three attack the fury, Dallion heard among the echo whispers. At this point, there were so many of them that they had become a constant hiss in the background.

*We must take them down at the same time. No mistakes*

We have a rather special item tonight, the archduke said, oblivious to what Dallion could hear. Something from my personal collection. Priscord wanted to get her hands on it, of course. They all would. Now Ill sell it to the highest bidder just to prove how pitiful she is.

Dallions muscles tensed. The whispers kept on increasing, blocking out the nobles words until, suddenly, they all stopped.

Crap! Dallion thought. He knew all too well what was to follow.

No longer worried that his actions would create a major scandal, he split into twenty instances. Almost simultaneously, crossbow bolts rained onto him. The attack had started.

Ruby! Dallion shouted, while casting an aether sphere surrounding him, Diroh, the archduke and everyone else in the immediate vicinity.

How the hell did they get a crossbow in here?! he wondered. The overseer had explicitly said that no weapons were allowed at that banquet, not even a dagger. And yet, whoever had organized this attack had brought in the heavy artillery.

Waves of wind slashes flew in the direction of the crossbow attacker, causing the bolts to shatter before they had approached the target. Unfortunately, that was only the tip of the iceberg. Dozens of attackers had engaged as well, focusing on the armed guards and any nobles that tried to put up a fight.

A wall of ice blocked off the upper part of the hall from everyone else. Diroh had been faster to react than Dallion hoped.

Skye, Ruby, guard Di, he ordered, while starting a portal spell to summon his harpsisword. Now that the surprise attack had failed, if anyone would get hurt, it wouldnt be the archduke.

Archduke, we should take this in the open, Dallion split into instances.

To his horror, the noble had remained in his seat completely motionless, his lips half open, as if finishing the last word he was saying.

Before Dallion could figure out what was going on, magic threads shot out from the mage, forming a ten-circle spell that skewered three quarters of Dallions instances. Thankfully, five survived. Choosing one to become reality, Dallion quickly split again.

This was a tough one. Facing a mage of Nerots level was more than he could handle. His only advantages were speed and the close distance between them.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion dashed forward with a series of slash attacks.

Im not trying to harm the archduke, he quickly said, using his music skills to add as much calmness as possible in his words. Im trying to save him.

Sound threads attempted to attach themselves to the mage, yet the moment one made contact, it snapped, rendering the effort pointless. It was at that point that Dallion knew: the mage wasnt attacking him because he feared that Dallion was part of the coup; he was attacking because he had organized it.

Aether barriers emerged as quickly as Dallion could strike. While to an onlooker it might have seemed that he was dealing significant damage to the mage, in reality, the blade was stopping a quarter of an inch shy of its target.

Ruby, attack! he ordered.

Nothing followed. Dallions first reaction was to turn around with one of his instances and see what was going on. However, it was at that point that he noticed: nothing had followed. The attacks, the yells, even the screams of panic had all disappeared. It was as if everyone and everything in the room had frozen in time, leaving him and Nerot to hash it out.

Infusing his sword with spark, Dallion continued on the offensive. His opponent kept casting spells with both hands, each more intricate than the last. The speed at which this was done was passable. The technique, on the other hand, was astounding. Each spell seemed original, with so many false connections and dummy symbols that Dallion had no idea what the effects would be. In situations such as this, it was best not to find out.

Skipping between surviving instances, he consciously targeted the mages hands. The attacks remained inefficient as before, but nine times out of ten Dallion would sever the threads before the spell could fully form, rendering it harmless.

Arrogant, Nerot said once it was clear that the two were at an impasse. This was one case in which Dallion was grateful he was fighting a far older opponent. If the mage had been a decade or two younger, the fight would have long been over. Bad at magic, so focusing on interrupting others.

The rules of the wilderness, mage. Dallion attempted a multi attack in the hopes that one of the strikes would break through the defensive barriers. It didnt.



Only the weak don't follow etiquette.

Using his left hand, Dallion attempted to cast a simple aether projectile spell. The mage wasn't able to stop him. Six bolts darted forward, striking Nerot's torso. Similar to all previous attacks, only flashes of light followed.

There has to be a mega spell on the floor, Dallion thought.

That would explain the stillness all around him. Or was it stillness? As far as he knew, the fight between him and the mage might as well be locked within a single second of real time. Chrono-spells weren't a popular area, mostly due to their highly impractical nature, but there were still those that dabbled. Such spells were difficult to prepare, almost impossible to execute, and seldom achieved anything. Or maybe this wasn't time magic. There was only one instance in which time dilation occurred—when within an item, a prison item, to be precise.

You turned the entire room into a prison item? Dallion asked, while still attacking.

Not a complete idiot. The other grunted.

That was why the mage had called Dallion arrogant. It had nothing to do with his fighting style, but the fact that he had remained half an inch above the ground at all times. Unlike everyone else in the room, Dallion's feet had never come into contact with the floor, preventing him from getting sucked into the prison item's realm.

If you created the trap, why the attackers? Dallion asked.

No longer had he done so, when the answer hit him like a brick. As long as there was only one survivor, the emperor would accept any account he was given.

You aren't betraying the empire, Dallion said. You just want to replace the archduke.

No. I'm just severing my ties with the so-called archmage, waves of hatred emanated from the man.

Chapter 763: A Noble's Wrath

The mage's hands moved at a vast speed, creating the impression he was casting six spells simultaneously. Dallion's motions were even faster, but the quality of the spells was largely lacking. Only his sword skills made up for the difference, maintaining the stalemate.

Circles of purple light and magic symbols flashed into existence, only to be destroyed near completion. Even so, an occasional spell would sneak through. Most of the time, it was Dallion's spells that were ignored. Too weak to deal any actual damage, they found their way to their target where they would fizzle off. When Nerot managed to complete one of his spells, however, the entire scene changed.

Initially, Dallion feared that the mage would resort to a mass destruction spell and kill everyone in the hall. Why he hadn't still remained a mystery. If Nil were here, he'd probably provide an explanation.

Spikes of aether burst into the air, filling the space like magic caltrops. All of Dallion's instances that came into contact with the objects were punctured by his very own magic threads that grew out from the inside. In the process, Dallion lost five health for each instance killed off this way. Normally, such a small amount would be negligible, yet that was only as long as Lux was nearby.

Spinning through the hall like a deadly ballet dancer, Dallion kept on slashing at the mage with a series of spark attacks. He had to be careful not to come into contact with the floor or anything touching it. That was the trick that had caused Ruby and the cloud fox to get captured in the trapboth of them were in contact with Diroh, who, for some reason, had chosen to walk on the actual floor.

I think Ill have to use the combo again, Dallion thought as he cast an aether barrier on the ceiling to leap onto for a direct plunge attack. The execution was a bit rusty, allowing the mage to cast a protection long before the blade struck him.

Dallion twisted his face in anger. Too many of the skills he relied on were unusable. Line and point attacks were out of the questionhe didnt want to be the one slaughtering everyone in the room. Spreading magic threads through the blade was also impossible since he needed it to have enough spark to keep shattering Nerots outer defenses in the hopes of eventually slicing through. Music seemed inefficient, acrobatics and athletics were severely limited due to the prison item trap What else was there?

The structure of the Academy has lasted for centuries, the mage hissed as he kept on casting. The slight pause between words indicated that the fight was exerting him more than he liked to admit. Created by the emperor himself. And otherworlders like you shattered all that just to gain an inkling of power.

What did the Azures promise you? Dallion twisted in then thrust forward, performing a shattering strike aimed at the mages shoulder.

The pure force of the attack managed to pass through the shell of magic, shattering the old mans left arm.

For a moment Dallion felt a rush of euphoria. Sadly, it was short-lived. A mesh of green light formed around the wounded area, repairing both wounds and attire.

The Azure federation be damned! The old man hissed. Theyre no better. Battle mages with delusions of grandeur incapable of seeing the greatness of the universe. Its time for mages with actual knowledge rise to the top as it should be.

Another rogue megalomaniac, Dallion sighed internally. They were always the same, just as they were too prideful to admit when they received help. Katka and the other battle mages of the Academy had dealt with close to a dozen such individuals so far and it was always the same: vague, prideful, senior mages who felt even more unappreciated after the latest world changes. Some had even tried to establish rival academies only to find that changing the world order of things wasnt as easy as they imagined.

Is that why you put me into these clothes? Dallion successfully cast another spell, causing a circle of twelve aether blades to emerge around him. So I cant use my weapons to stop you? Music threads linked to the blades, causing them to resonate with pain.

The effect was harmful to everyone, though Dallion hoped it would be more so on the mage. He really hated fighting such enemies. They appeared frail and snobbish, yet possessed such an arsenal

of spells that could make them boost all of their traits at a moments notice, and that was before they started using the really devastating casts.

Can you hear me? Dallion asked, changing his approach. If he couldnt go against an enemy directly, he was going to go after his clothes. I know you can hear me,

he said, using his music skills to add a note of authority.

We were warned not to talk to you, the robe replied.

In the midst of fighting, Dallion cracked a smile. Of course, it would be the robe that would rebel. Someone as snobbish as Nerot probably viewed it as an unwanted stepchild. As a mage he was required to wear it, even if he strongly preferred to have something a lot fancier.

You dont like him much, do you? Dallion pressed on. Why put up with someone who hates you?

*Hes still my owner.*

Help me and Ill be your new one, Dallion said. This was the first time he had actually offered to bribe an item. It wasnt a lie. Seeing the magic threads and included symbols, he could tell that the robe had close to exceptional qualities. It wasnt as good as the archmages, but definitely better than his.

*You already have a robe.*

*I also have the ability to modify items, far better than the old man.*

There was a moment of silence. The intensity of the fight between Dallion and Nerot increased. Then one of the mages long sleeves caught his fingers. It seemed natural something that could happen to anyone who valued style over practicality. However, Dallion knew that hed gotten his answer.

The next time the harpsword struck, no barrier emerged, letting it slice through the layers of garment and into the mans side.

You better repair that once youre done, the robe said with an almost audible wink.

Bastard! the old mage screamed. All of his spells fizzed away as he quickly started a series of new ones to compensate for the unexpected event. The waves of anger coming from him were deafening. And still, beyond the hatred, there was something else a barely audible voice that kept whispering.

Once you kill him, youll be able to take your rightful place as the head of Linatol, the voice said.

Even he has an echo? Dallion wondered.

Weapons and magic aren't the only ways to win a battle, the haprisword said. Realm invasions were quite popular, a lot more than in the current age.

That made sense. It was one of the first warnings Dallion received, both within the realms and without. He had often asked himself why such importance was put on that, considering how rarely it actually occurred. Now he had his answer. Having one's realm invaded was devastating, and also there was no way to tell that anything was wrong. The mage and all the other members of the coup might have had their realms invaded months or even years ago. It was even possible that they themselves had forgotten about it under the influence of a powerful limiting echo. They would continue with their lives, their loyalties unchanged until the moment they were thrust into action like now.

Taking advantage of his opponent's weakness, Dallion quickly put a few more strikes in. His speed, combined with the robes meddler, managed to grant him a few hits before the mage had successfully cast his protection and healing spells. In his mind, Dallion could almost see the red rectangles pop up. Unfortunately, that didn't prove enough to earn him the victory. Unlike Katka, experienced mages were difficult to take down. Nil was very right when he said that a good strategy trumped quick reflexes each time.

A new set of aether swords emerged, though this time belonging to Nerot. The mage had swallowed his pride and was now using anything and everything to remain in the fight, including copying Dallion's low-level spells. Purple filled the room, giving it the appearance of a vortex realm.

Every second dozens of Dallion's instances faded out of existence, only to be replaced by dozens more. Yet, despite the huge strain, he could see he was starting to gain the upper hand. As much as the mage was doing, he was merely compensating for that single moment his robe had gone against him.

Harp, will his magic withstand a point attack? Dallion asked.

Maybe, the weapons guardian didn't sound certain. It's risky.

*Not if I angle it right. All I need is to make sure that there's nothing between him and the wall when I*

Reality shattered like glass. Fragments that could be felt, but didn't exist, filled the hall bringing time to normal.

Both Dallion and the mage instinctively pulled back. Crossbow bolts hit the ceiling, destroying an entire portion of it. With several of his instances, Dallion could see Ruby send wind slashes against a small group of merchants who were charging at Diroh. A wave of ice quickly stopped them in their tracks as the fury focused on other targets. Even Skye was moving about like a ball of mist, blocking the vision of everyone who got near. But amid all the chaos, the event that was most notable of all was the archduke standing up from his throne.

Raw power emanated from him as he rose like a titan, his sights set on the mage.

Did you think you could contain me in a realm, Nerot? his voice boomed. Beneath him, the throne crumbled as if made of sugar. You've grown bold and stupid in your old age.

Black tendrils surrounded the mage as the overseer also emerged in the room. Aether and void clashed, with neither gaining the upper hand.

When you ran from the Academy I took you in and this is how you thank me? A chunk of the wall broke off, transforming into a spike as it flew at the mages stomach. The hit was fatal, piercing through tendrils, barriers, and the mages body himself.

The sight was enough to send chills down Dallions spine. That was the true power of an archduke. The political defeat had cost him a lot, but as a person, he remained strong as ever. It was that power that kept all other of his relatives at bay. They wanted the throne, but were fully aware they couldnt have it. The display of power was also a warning: neither mage, nor overseer, nor plot attempt was capable of killing off the rightful ruler of the province.

Dallion looked at the remnants of the mage. While he could still sense the robe and many of the other item guardians, the magic that had been throughout the old man was no more. While a relief, that also was a pity. Dallion would have liked to have a go at questioning the echoes in his realm. It was very likely that most of them would have faded away before answering any questions, but the pride of their owners would have ensured that they be seen doing so. Now, all of Nerots secrets died with him.

The floor behind Archduke Linatol rose up, forming a new throne in the place of the last. Content that he had made his point, the noble sat back down, completely disinterested in the rest of the fighting that was taking place.

So, he looked at Dallion while the overseer joined the fray on his behalf. Where were we?

#### Chapter 764: Present from the Past

The screams and chaos continued. Even with the archdukes soldiers rushing to the main banquet hall, now that the alarm was raised, they were having difficulty fighting their way through the room. Despite the echoed attackers not being that numerous, they were placed at key spots, ensuring that the hall remained isolated for a while. Originally, that was supposed to be until the assassination. Now that it had failed, they were simply fighting for their lives.

A merchant with a sectioned sword leapt past the fury guards, aiming to reach the archduke. A column of stone emerged from the ground, pinning him to the ceiling.

Sorry you had to see this, the noble said, the air of boredom returning to him. I was hoping for a much more elegant display.

For someone who had survived a coup attempt, he seemed remarkably calm. Given what had happened forty years ago, maybe he was used to this. It wouldnt be out of the question to think that there were echo recreations of past bloodshed, just so that future nobles knew what to expect and how to react when they did.

Have there been other attempts? Dallion asked, finding himself at a lack of topics.

No one was foolish enough. I guess war tends to make people stupid. Priscord, Dreud, and now Nerot. All so nave, incapable of seeing that they cant do anything beyond the confines the emperor has placed. The column sunk back into the floor, leaving a mangled corpse. I aimed to sell the aura sword at the auction, the archduke changed topics. As a world item, it remains the envy of the empire. Priscord tried to take the one Id lent to your former guild. A cynical smile formed on his face. Useless, of course. I had the item returned to me way before she made her move. Even when she tried to be sneaky, I could tell months in advance.

And yet she managed to win, Dallion added mentally.

I think Ill let you have it.

A world item? Dallions shock was no less than if a dragon had swooped down from the ceiling.

I have several, the noble waved his hand. One less would hardly matter.

Also, he didnt want to feel indebted. That was the thing about high-powered nobles, a lesson Dallion had learned the hard way. Even if it wasnt stated openly, the notion would gnaw on them politically as well as internally, probably causing more realm flaws than it was worth.

Another wall of ice divided the hall in two, isolating the crossbowman. Diroh was doing remarkably well, considering her lack of actual combat experience. March must have trained her quite hard.

Youve grown a lot since I last saw you. Many say that if you hadnt discovered magic, youd have become a noble by now.

That was a popular topic of discussion. Even Dallion himself often considered what might have happened if hed held out for three more levels before accepting the Purple Moons offer. Putting aside the fact that hed likely have died, hed probably be serving the Lanitol family as some minor noble. In time, and with a bit of luck, he might have even risen to the point of obtaining a city of his own. At no time could one advance as fast as during a war just like his grandfather had. Provided that Dallion didnt do anything that would get him banished, he might have been instrumental in the countess fall and potentially be made lord mayor of Nerosal.

It was fortunate that you didnt. The archduke narrowed his eyes. The last time otherworlders visited the palace, a lot of bad things happened.

*Otherworlders?*

Dallions grandfather had sworn that hed only seen one other like him. Had the old man lied? Knowing him, Dallion suspected that to be the case. Still, if the archduke was referring to Kraisten, who had been with him?

But enough about the past. A stone chair appeared next to Dallion. Sit. Lets discuss more pleasant things while the noise dies down.

May I make one request before we do? Dallion asked. If there was a moment to try and push his luck, it was now.

Intrigue flowed from the noble as he nodded, indicating for Dallion to continue.

Id like the mages robe, if youd allow it?

You want his clothes?

Just the robe. It has some magical properties, Dallion was quick to add.

Ive often heard that mages are like vultures, gaining strength from each others corpses. He glanced at the body that had been Nerot. Why not? Pick him dry. Take anything you wish, but leave the corpse. That belongs to me.

Dallion nodded. Only the robe.

Well then. Ill have someone fetch it for you.

It took another five minutes for the noise to die down. The overseer, along with the fury guards, and everyone on the archdukes side, had killed off the last of the puppets. Dallion would have wished for a few survivors to question, but the nobles order was absolute: no survivors.

Meanwhile, he and Dallion went on to have a conversation about artifacts and other small talk matters. The whole thing was awkward, but Dallion didnt dare go against it. All the arrogance he had built up in the last six months had melted away. If this was the strength of an archduke at the low of his life, one could imagine what the really powerful ones would be like.

Once the fighting was over, the bodies of the loyal were taken out of the hall by the archdukes soldiers. Everyone else was quickly consumed by the overseer, who then left the room with a bow. All damage to the walls, floor, and ceiling vanishedlikely mended by the archduke himself. Yellow clad servants quickly replaced the chairs and tables, proceeding to replenish the food and drinks that had gone to waste. Soon enough, it was as if the unpleasant incident hadnt occurred. The number of guests had vastly decreased, now barely a quarter of what they had been. None of the non-awakened had survived. Of the remaining, most of the lesser nobles were dead or injured, confirming the principle that only the strong endured.

The banquet continued into the night. There was no auction. The topic of conversation revolved around events in the north, as well as the Academy and the rogue mages it was hunting down. The incident, as well as anything dealing with Archduke Priscord, were deliberately avoided.

Nothing like creating a bubble, Dallion thought. The weak were probably influenced by the archdukes domain, and the rest knew better than to venture there. Considering it was said that the Moons disapproved of using echoes to manipulate people, a surprising amount of nobles used it on a whim.

Diroh seemed surprisingly at ease. Dallion could still sense emanations of alarm and distrust emanating from her, but not to the amount he expected. Additionally, she tended to hide them well.

Well played, the overseer approached Dallion once the archduke had focused on a discussion with a few members of his immediate family. Didnt think youd earn a gift.

Oh? Thats what youre surprised about? Dallion thought.

Before you arrived, he planned on making an example of you, the overseer continued. Oh, not kill you, of course. Just humiliate you as much as permissibly possible. The whole de-robing thing, having to publicly explain your failures and what not. He even planned on Itella challenging you in front of everyone just to create a spectacle.

Let me guess. The former mage assisted in choosing the humiliation methods.

Taking advantage of someone who wanted to take advantage. Nerot had played on the archdukes vanity, while the Azure Federation had played on his.

What about you? Dallion asked.

Me? I serve the one who controls the city.

And who is that, precisely?

The overseer smiled. Dallion had seen overseers go against their owners, but this wasn't the case. More likely, there was some spell or artifact involved. Now that the whole room had been deprived of foreign elements, the secret would remain hidden. Dallion could almost hear Nil explain that any information on the matter might make the archduke seem more incompetent than if all was left to speculation.

Your prize, the blond handed Dallion the mage's robe. It was exactly as it had been: torn and covered in blood. Thankfully, whole enough for the guardian to remain alive. Looking at it, Dallion could see the threads of magic circulating.

Thanks. He took it.

And this as well. The overseer drew a sword from his very leg. It would have been a nice magic trick if one didn't know what was involved. The aura sword that you helped obtain.

I take it that's a hint for me to get going?

There's no further need for you here. With all matters resolved, you can get back to doing whatever you're doing. A request for a mage replacement has already been sent, so I expect the Academy to send one in a few days.

That sounded so typical of a noble. Several hours ago, there had been an urgent insistence for Dallion to participate in the banquet and the following auction. Now he couldn't be shooed away fast enough. Taking the sword, Dallion made his way towards Diroh.

Were leaving, he whispered as he passed by.

The fury, who had engaged in polite conversation with a group of lesser nobles, excused herself and followed Dallion out of the hall.

Seemed like you were having fun, Dallion said, knowing full well it was a lie.

As they walked, Ruby flew off the fury's shoulder, landing back on Dallion's.

Not as much as the time you took me from Halburn, she replied. And you said I'll be safer with you.

You were safe. At least to the point that Dallion could ensure. Next time, walk above the ground.

I'll make a note.

There could be spells everywhere.

In all honesty, Dallion had fallen for it as well. If it hadn't been for the item that warned him, he might as well have been dead. There was no guarantee Dallion was fast and vigilant, but the heads up was vastly appreciated.

The only annoying part was that he still didn't have any idea which item had warned him. Even after the attack had been thwarted, the items had remained just as silent as before. Few had responded to nudges, even less had said anything remotely useful.

Do we keep the clothes? the fury asked.



Dallions instinct was to say no. Even after checking the threads for echoes and magic, he remained cautious when it came to gifts. Then again, it was obvious that they had no traps within them, else they would have already triggered during the assassination attempt.

If you want to. Im leaving mine. I cant use it where Im going.

I think Ill do the opposite, the fury countered.

Dont just drop items youve known for years. It was a bit hypocritical since he had done the same many times, especially when it came to clothes. In all honesty, he couldnt even remember where his first set of improved clothes from Dherma was. Take them with you to the Academy and then decide what to do.

Sure. Whats a little more weight?

No one escorted them as they made their way to the guest mansion. The moment Dallion was in the open, he cast a flight spell, darting in the direction of the structure. Diroh followed closely behind. Arriving, Dallion checked all the previous items for implanted echoes, then quickly changed clothes and geared up.

You got an aura sword? the armadil shield asked, impressed.

Its not yours, Dallion replied.

*It doesnt matter. Aura swords are mage weapons.*

You told me that you werent a mage.

*Im not, but they have to be in order to be a world item. A lot of magic is required to make a habitable realm. Tap into that type of magic and*

He doesnt need to learn that, Harp interrupted. Let him learn at his own pace.

There was a moment of silence.

Youre his guardian, the armadil shield replied with a nonchalant shrug. Just keep in mind that his pace has been rather slow lately. Six months for seven magic levels is pretty bad. Either he picks up the pace or hell stay where he is. You know better than me that there are no rewards for trying.

Chapter 765: Twenty-Seven Sightings

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Orange clouds floated on a purple sky. There had been a time when Dallion would have found such a sight breathtaking, or at the very least remarkable. Now, it was just another day in his realm. Sitting at the top of Ondas tower, Dallion stared into the distance.

Hey, old man! the teen nymph shouted. Youre messing up the look!

If there was one person whose arrogance had grown along with Dallions it was Onda. The hammer guardian had always seen himself as a genius and, thanks to the Moonstone in the realm, his opinion of himself had grown even further.

Youve no idea how much time and skill it took to get it right!

Funny. Up to today, Dallion hadn't minded the attitude. In fact, he hadn't even noticed it.

I need some assistance, he said, glancing down.

At the comment, the guardian froze. There was a spark of emotions within him that was quickly subdued.

She said not to encourage you, Onda whispered.

Harp? Dallion split into a few instances and looked around. I won't be doing anything reckless, he said with a sigh. It's forging related.

Forging? The guardian didn't sound convinced.

A while back, you said that there are more complicated things than crafting metals. I want to learn magic crafting.

Magic crafting? Onda shivered slightly while saying the magic word.

Whatever the proper term is. I know you can do it, so

Cant. The guardian quickly interrupted. She said no magic.

Seriously? Dallion grumbled. Harp! he shouted in the direction of the harp's words tower.

Other than a few waves, there was no reaction. Harp was determined not to meddle in his development, and that included not helping him with anything magic related, at least for the time being. After what had happened in Lanitol, Dallion would have thought that he'd be given a pass for reasonable requests. Apparently, that wasn't the case.

In all honesty, his request wasn't exactly safe or random. The thought of challenging the archduke's son had made him remember the duel they'd had back in Nerosal, including the origami weapons the noble had used. Creating such a weapon would be very beneficial in more ways than one. For one thing, Dallion was considering upgrading Lux's home. Having the firebird follow him about like a bladebow with kaleidervision sights was starting to get bothersome.

What about enchanting? Dallion asked. I've already done that many times.

The nymph shook his head.

That was temporary.

Maintaining his calm exterior, Dallion waited for a short while longer, then left his realm. The first thing he felt was a wave of air hitting him in the face. Moments later, his senses returned to normal.

Normally, entering a realm while flying wasn't the best of ideas, but it didn't count while on a cloud fort. Initially, Dallion had wanted to avoid the fuss, but when the squad of furies within the cloud had offered to take them, the choice was made for him.

Aware of their emotions, he knew that the offer was extended mostly because of Diroh. While guard furies assisted mages, they rarely went out of their way to catch up to one mid flight. The rumors of her being royalty must have spread.

You can rest a bit, the fury told Dallion. He was a seasoned veteran who didn't have time for all the rank bullshit. We won't reach the Academy till tomorrow.

One additional day. If Dallion had continued flying on his own, he'd have been there by now.

Any news? he asked, suppressing a yawn.

Where do I start? The Azures are gathering armies in the northeast. Mages too. I'm expecting a major clash in a month at most. The new archduke is also positioning her forces. Now that she's been given the new spot, she can't afford to mess up.

It was tempting to crack a smile. It would be nice if Priscord got humiliated in the upcoming battle, but that was unlikely to happen. The emperor had picked her for the position, which meant that he'd back her up with some of his legions. Losing two archdukes in the same area wasn't something that would look good.

Lots of crimsons are also there, the fury continued. At least we get to enjoy the skies here for a while.

Dallion nodded. He, too, was going to join them.

A bunch of rogues formed a new enclave in the west. It's out of the empire, so no one's bothering for now. I told some of your lot that it's a mistake. No one listened.

Someone will take care of them.

The west, at least, was deprived of any presence. Only the Order was slowly spreading in that direction. No wonder the last Star had made his stronghold there.

There's been a few skirmishes in the southeast, but nothing major. The Alliance is keeping the Azures in check. Only minor kingdoms are poking about, trying to get themselves noticed by one of the powers.

Yes, everyone's choosing sides.

That was true and things were only going to get tougher. Settlements, cities, even small countries were quick to ally themselves to one of the three powers. Even before the war began, several of the minor players had made their intentions known. Most had allied to the empire. Now that its position was shaky, they were looking at the other options. It didn't end with whole settlements either. Guilds and trade organizations had been moving about, going further to the heart of the empire or out of it. Even hunter dens weren't immune.

Before leaving Lanitol, Dallion had flown by the structure out of a feeling of nostalgia. What he found was an empty lot. He had expected some of the hunters to have gone there were many dwarves among them. Yet, the building was missing as well. A more optimistic person might have assumed that the hunters had found a way to take their den as they left the city. In reality, it had likely been absorbed by the overseer. Neutrality was a dangerous notion, especially if those proclaiming to be neutral were strong.

Over a dozen ghost towns have formed on the border, the fury said. If they remain too long without a master, the wilderness will take them.

That's how it usually works.

The fury glanced at Dallion sideways, but didn't add anything more. It was obvious he wanted to know more about the fury, just as it was obvious that Dallion had no intention of sharing. The

moment of calm had given him a while to relax, and now that adrenalin had loosened its grip, less immediate concerns had resurfaced.

Prophecies, he said to himself. So far, he had heard two. The first had come from a nymph sheet acquired years ago. The dwarf hunter who had found it swore that an otherworlder would bring to the end to the world, or at the very least a substantial change. When combined with what Cleric had shared, the worst might have come to pass. It was Dallion who had made it possible for Adzorg to construct his device. If he found the final pieces, he might pop the barrier between worlds like a soap bubble, letting void creatures pour into reality unimpeded.

If there was nothing you could do, the Order wouldnt have sent you, Gen said from Dallions realm. Theres no point in perfect prophecies.

There is if all you need to do is hide, Dallion replied mentally.

*If youre hiding, youre not doing it very well.*

Dallion smiled. His echo had a suitable sense of humor, even if it didnt help particularly right now.

What about vortex gleams? Dallion asked.

Vortex gleams, the fury repeated. Theres talk of a few out east. The crimsons will know more. They dont tell the rest of us much.

Right. Dallion leaned back in the sea iron mesh that served as a chair. Wake me up when we get to the Academy. Dont stop for anything until we get there, not even assists.

Youre the mage.

If the flight was eventful, Dallion never got to learn about it. Over a day, he spent the time sleeping. To a large part, that was to diminish the fatigue that had stacked up in the last six months. More importantly, though, he was hoping to have a Moon dream. With the curse, he hadnt been getting anything that might help. This time was no different, although it didnt bring nightmares either. All it brought was a whole lot of blankness: Dallion closed his eyes one moment, then when he opened them again, he was a few hundred feet from the battle mage building. According to the armadil shield, they had been there for hours, but no one had dared wake him up.

*How nice of them,*

Dallion thought and sat up.

The fury on guard was newfar younger than the previous one, tasked with keeping the cloud stable. Everyone else, Diroh included, was gone.

Wheres everyone? Dallion cracked his back. Sleeping on war clouds wasnt as comfortable as people assumed it would be.

Your novice was escorted into the building, battle apprentice, the fury replied, using Dallions standard title. All your things were moved to your room as well.

And the furies?

They were sent out on another cloud. Katka ordered that we leave you to sleep undisturbed, so I get the picture.

Dallion cast a spell, rising up from the cloud. Without a word of thanks, he floated straight to Katka's room on the upper floor of the building, then went inside. The magic symbols on the walls glowed brighter as he passed. Recognizing him as belonging here, they remained in their present state.

The moment he flew in, the room widened, increasing tenfold in size. This wasn't normal. Katka wasn't a fan of modifications, preferring to keep things as they were. Ironically, that made many of the Academy mages see her as a snob. In their eyes, illusions weren't good enough for her, since she resorted to getting the actual physical thing and bringing it here.

The current modification spell had turned the room into a modern Earth corporate office. There was lots of space, full of desks, cheap plants, water coolers and a glass walled meeting room at the far side. Looking closely, Dallion saw four figures gathered there.

Just great, he thought.

The archmage was present along with Katka. The other two were silhouettes made of cloud matter and water, respectively. That meant that the entire Shimmering Circle had gathered to discuss something. Since Dallion had joined, there had been only one similar meeting. Back then, the woman Dallion had seen in Gassil's memory fragment had also been there, even if no one had formally introduced her to him. There were a few more instances in which she had taken shape to discuss something with Katka. As for the last member, he remained completely unknown. Dallion was aware of his existence, but nothing more.

Dal, the archmage's voice echoed throughout the room, as if he were using loudspeakers. Join us.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion made his way to the door of the meeting room and went inside. The conference table was large enough to hold eight people. The seat next to Katka was left free, indicating he was supposed to take it.

This must be important. Dallion said, using his magic vision in an attempt to see the people behind the constructs. He was able to see the magic threads connecting the forms to invisible portals, but not what lay beyond. First time I see everyone gathered.

The sharp look the archmage gave him quickly told Dallion to tone down the humor.

We heard what happened down south, the man said. What are your dealings with the Order?

You know I can't tell you that, Dallion said calmly. Moon vows and all that.

Convenient.

What I can say is that the Azures tried to take out the archduke. There was a moment's pause. And myself.

You were targeted? Katka asked, more surprised than intrigued.

I guess Grym is still mad at me for last time. They managed to put echoes in a lot of the people at the banquet. Most of them were normies, but there were a few awakened as well as the local mage.

We know, the archmage said. Would have been nice to bring one of them alive for questioning.

Wasnt my fault. The archduke absorbed all the evidence. I did manage to get the mages robe, though. If theres anything to be learned, Ill find it.

Such a marvelous ability, the cloud woman said. Sometimes you make me envious.

Thats not why I called for this, the archmage hissed. A messenger arrived from the emperor himself. The vortex gleam that was spotted not too long ago wasnt the only one. As it turns out, its only a drop in the bucket. There have been twenty-seven confirmed sightings, but unlike the last one, the levels are much higher.

## Chapter 766: Two Teams, One War

What levels are we talking about? Dallion found himself asking.

Even with all the resources of the Academy, he hadnt heard of anything higher than an eight, let alone seen one. As a general rule of thumb, mages were discouraged from entering vortexes that were more than a tenth of their level. Mages that were experienced enough and had the appropriate equipment could venture up to twice that. It wasnt by chance that Harp had been against him venturing into the level four vortex in Nerosal.

Double digits, Alien said. And by that, I dont mean a ten.

Double digits, Dallion thought.

Any vortex over a five required a group of mages working in unison. Even Katka wouldnt be able to handle a level seven vortex on her own. For something of a higher level, an army would be needed and as it would happen, an army was amassing right there; two of them, in fact.

I dont think its a good idea to share what youve learned about Adzorg, the armadil shield said.

*Even if hes the cause of all this?*

Especially because of that. Think about it. When someone discovers that theres a device to create high-level vortexes, what do you think theyll use it for? Whichever side wins, theyll keep on tempting fate just so that they could gain magic. Regret resonated in the guardians words. Trust me on this. Ive seen it happen before.

The dryads had a similar one when they were banished? Dallion felt curious.

*No, it was something completely different. The principle remains the same. When provided with the means to gain an astronomical benefit, people tend not to think anything can go wrong.*

The Azures know about it as well, the archmage continued. Thats one of the reasons theyre gathering in the area.

Just like a pit stop before moving on to the capital, Dallion said.

Nice comparison. the water construct let out a laugh.

Its true, though. If they boost up their forces, our numbers wont matter. Thats not the biggest issue, though.

All eyes turned towards him. Until now, no one took him particularly seriously. That statement had attracted more than a bit of attention. Dallion didnt know whether to be glad or concerned. Given how powerful the members of the circle were, and how long theyd been in this world, he thought they would have seen the obvious by now.

What if the Academys forces reach it first? He added after several seconds of silence.

Hows that bad? Katka leaned forward.

A group of overenthusiastic egomaniacs absorbing thirty levels of magic in a day? How could that go wrong?

The words had just the effect that could be expected. Dallion could hear concern, even outright fear, emanate from everyone present. They were right to be terrified. So far, the only thing that had kept low level mages from running amok were high-level mages a natural pyramid of power that kept everyone in their place. Anyone who tried to rise up too fast and recklessly was given a stern reminder of whos boss and, in the worst cases, rogued. With several high-level vortexes, that would change. All a group needed to do was absorb a level seven vortex to be able to attempt one even greater. Just like in the silly mobile games Dallion used to play way back on Earth, each success would boost their power, allowing them to grow further and further until all the towers were gone, or the mages themselves were consumed.

Is there a way to destroy vortexes? The water construct turned to Alien.

The archmage frowned.

Not those that have been gleamed, but maybe theres a way to stop the rest. For that, we must find the irritant thats causing them. Since theyre all appearing in the same general area, it must be a localized event. Katka, you and Dal will lead a team there and start searching.

Were still talking about a massive area, the woman crossed her arms. Its a long shot, even with his device. Well need the whole legion.

The legion is needed in case the Azures launch an attack. Or the Alliance. Just because theyve kept quiet so far doesnt mean that they arent plotting something.

Sure, but you cant expect us to

What if we ask the Order for help? Dallion suggested.

Silence filled the room, telling him hed said something he shouldnt have.

We can ask the Order, right?

Its complicated, Alien muttered beneath his breath.

As a general rule, its never good to ask help from the Order, the cloud construct said. As she did, Dallion could almost swear he saw a smile morph momentarily on her face before disappearing into the cloud mass of the head. Whatever the Order grabs hold of, it doesnt let go. They play the long game. Always calm, neutral most of the time, theyve been slowly expanding for centuries. If they gain a foothold in that part of the world, we might as well disband the Academy.

Arent you overreacting just a bit? Dallion couldnt help himself.

You just said that we shouldn't trust our own troops when it comes to the vortex fields, but you're fine trusting the Order? They've always craved awakened with the magic trait. If it wasn't for the first Tamin emperor they'd have had their own brand of mages long ago.

Mentally Dallion clenched his fists. Unlike them, he had an idea what the Order's interests on the matter were. It was so tempting to just share everything he knew and hope for an optimal solution to this problem, but if there was one thing that everything said so far had confirmed it was that there was no trusting the circle. Several of them, if not all, had been instrumental in causing Adzorg's device to fail in the first place. There was no telling what they would do if they had unrestricted access to it.

The fun of being a mage, Dallion thought. The only state in which trust is only based on paranoia.

I think I should go searching for Adzorg, he said. There are rumors that he's not too far away from the vortex fields.

It isn't time for personal vendettas. The archmage grumbled.

It's no accident he's there. What do you think will happen if he starts absorbing vortexes? I've no idea what restrictions were placed on him, but with magic being the trait of exceptions, how long do you think it'll take him to remove them once he's obtained that much power?

You've become quite convincing when you want to be, the armadil shield said. And even without using magic. Commendable.

Two teams? Alien asked, indicating he had reluctantly agreed to the idea.

I'll attract too much attention with a group. I'm still a hunter. I'll be able to blend in on my own.

After the incident at the Academy, I doubt it.

So, I'll need a few defocus trinkets. Won't be the first time a hunter has used those. As you well know. As long as I'm hunting a person, especially one considered a traitor by all, no one will think twice.

The archmage turned to the cloud construct.

Could work, the woman controlling it said. Definitely better than flying in with a squad of battle mages. We might need a distraction. Nothing grand, just a few skirmishes to divert attention for a few weeks.

I'll go see the emperor. Alien was definitely not pleased, but even he seemed aware that was their best bet. And what about your novice?

The sudden change of topic was typical of Alien. Dallion still didn't know him well, but one thing he had observed was that the man needed to have the last word. Now that Dallion's suggestion had been informally approved, he'd rather find a topic to ostracize him on rather than continue with the more important matters at hand.



Its someone I needed taught, he said.

Abusing your status as a mage for personal reasons?

That was rich. If there was anything that Alien had done was to abuse his authority ever since Dallion had first met him. Sadly, given that he was the current archmage, that wasnt much of an argument.

The circle owes me one. Now Im collecting.

Shes not a mage, the cloud construct said. Teaching her would be pointless.

Shes not just a standard fury, either. Were already using the crimson ones, why not teach a blue fury as well?

I dont need to be here for this, the water construct said, then splashed to the floor as the thread maintaining it was severed.

Judging by everyones reaction, this had to be a common occurrence. Not batting an eye, Katka cast a spell to lift the water from the ground, then transported it out of the room through the cracks in the door, and into the nearest water dispenser.

You cant just declare novices, the archmage pressed on.

I can if you back me up. She can already use ice magic, what else is required for her to be considered a mage?

Natural ice magic, Alien corrected.

Just let him have her, the cloud construct said. Hes gone through all the trouble to bring her here. Not to mention shes actual royalty.

News certainly travels fast, Dallion thought. Rather, the mysterious member of the circle had the means to collect it with scary efficiency.

Or do you need to check with the emperor on this?

The archmages face turned red. Based on the amount of anger emanating from him, Dallion would have expected to see pulsing veins all over his forehead.

Shes your responsibility. He glared at Dallion. You feed her, you clean her messes. And that concludes all favors the circle owes you.

Sure. Anything else you need me for? Dallion leaned back. I want to show her the ropes before I set off.

The silence was all that Dallion needed to hear. Given their permission, he didnt want to remain in the meeting room any longer than he had to. After all, the major decisions had already been made. From here on it was all a matter of Alien checking with the emperor liaisoning as the corporates would say back on Earthand dealing with the administrative part of the operation. It was extremely boring and Dallion didnt have the authority to deal with it, as he was often reminded.

The office exit led to the familiar medieval corridor that composed the building. The contrast created a moment of surreal wonder, though it quickly faded away.

Dallion expected Diroh to be in his room. She wasn't even though all his possessions were neatly piled up in one corner.

Any of you have an idea where Di is? He asked them.

She was on the first floor when they brought us here, his mandolin said.

First floor Dallion quickly turned around. That was good. At least they hadn't sent her to the Learning Hall. He was just about to go back to the corridor when he suddenly noticed that the doorway had vanished. In its place, there was nothing but a solid wall and without magic symbols on it.

Damn it! Dallion thought. Not again.

He knew perfectly well what would follow. Gritting his teeth, he braced for the waves of pain. Surprisingly, they never came.

So stressed out, a voice behind him said. Sounds of music followed.

Glancing over his shoulder, Dallion saw a dryad dressed entirely in green playing his ring chord. It wasn't a dryad, though. His entire body was made of purple light, indicating his divine nature.

I don't know what's worse. That you expect every visit to be accompanied by pain or that you've gotten used to it.

Is there getting used to a curse? Dallion asked.

No, but everyone believes so.

Dallion swallowed.

Did I do something I shouldn't have? he asked, trying to keep himself from trembling.

Quite the opposite, if you'd believe it. The archbishop of the Order mentioned you in his last talk with us.

He talks to you on a regular basis?

What do you think prayers are? Didn't you use to visit shrines and citadels to have a few words with me? Well, you were more eager to have a talk with Jiroh, but the principle holds. The Moon played a catchy melody on the musical instrument, then put it aside. The thing is, that he requested a reprieve until you help with his problem.

His problem? Dallion wondered. I thought it was everyone's

We can't do that.

There went the faint glimmer of hope Dallion had. It would have been too nice if he were to enjoy a few pain-free months.

What we can do is grant your wish and give you a hint of what you need to do to get free of your curse.

Dallion remained too still, fearing that if he allowed himself to believe, he'd only come crashing down worse than before.

Adzorg isn't the answer, but the answer lies with Adzorg.

Thats a bit vague. I knew you wouldnt give me much!

Its a start and enough to get you going. Who knows? If you do a good job, maybe therell be more hints to follow. The dryad vanished. Or maybe you wont even need them.

#### Chapter 767: The New Novice

The Learning Hall hadnt changed a bit in contrast to everything around it. The buildings that hadnt been destroyed by the emerald shardfly swarm were demolished by mages and rebuilt anew. Of course, it was golems that had done the building now a permanent presence throughout the whole of the Academy.

As he flew by, Dallion scanned the cluster for the dwarf item shop. He knew that the shopkeeper had been caught trying to escape. At present, he had joined the other culprits in the growing Academy prison fort. His daughter, on the other hand, had been cleared of all wrongdoing and given possession of the item shop.

Things have definitely changed a lot, Dallion thought, looking at the new building placement. From the sky, one could see that the randomly placed streets formed giant symbols a protection spell making sure that no foreign realities could enter this part of the world again.

Thats it? Diroh asked, flying beside Dallion.

You expected more? Dallion asked. For someone who couldnt see the purple threads and symbols, the place must have seemed rather boring.

Ive seen worse. The fury shrugged. Disappointment emanated from her like a waterfall.

Its a lot more impressive on the inside, Dallion smiled. Youll see.

When he had initially told her that hed be leaving her behind, he expected Diroh to get angry, protest, or at the very least make a sarcastic remark. Instead, she had merely nodded and told him she understood. The sincerity that came with that had alarmed him.

So this is where Ill be stuck? Di asked.

This is where youll sleep for the time being. Ive arranged to get a pass seal, so youll be able to come and go as you choose. Dont flaunt Skye too much. Mages are jealous and pets are fair game. From his shoulder, Ruby flicked his wings.

A small group of apprentices gathered at the Learning Hall entrance as Dallion landed. Being the ones left behind, they had rarely seen the battle apprentice in the flesh. Uncertain how to react, theyd whisper amongst themselves, keeping a distance from him. Diroh, naturally, got a lot more comments. Furies were no longer a rarity with all the cloud forts flying about, but someone as unusual as her was.

If she ever learns music, shed be a force of nature, the armadil shield said.

Air magic and music do complement each other, Dallion agreed.

*Your stay at the Academy has made you hopeless again,*

Vihrogon sighed. *If you only focus on work opportunities will pass you by.*

*I dont have time for this, shield.*

Road corridors extended through the building. Just as Dallion remembered it, the place was a city upon itself. Now, though, it was a lot less crowded than he remembered. Part of the mage instructors and apprentices had fled the tower during the previous chaos, a far larger part had been transferred to the mage legion. Only a tenth remained to deal with novices.

Remember this place, Dallion said as they entered the blue administration building. If theres anything you need, you can ask for it here.

Does that mean Ill get it?

Nice catch. It all depends.

The small group of children moved aside, letting the fury proceed with her registration. Since it was a special case, Dallion had sent a letter informing them of the circumstances. It was both refreshing and not that despite a major war going on, the local bureaucracy remained vastly unchanged.

Battle apprentice, the mage in charge rushed down the stairs to greet him. Such an honor to get a visit from you.

It took a tremendous amount of effort for Dallion not to narrow his eyes. Back when he was an apprentice, the man couldnt have been more condescending. Now that he was part of the Shimmering Circle and apprentice to Katka, not to mention close to the new archmage, the attitude had drastically changed.

Everything is in order, just as you requested, the mage continued with an oily smile. All that remains is the apprentice seal, and your novice is good to go.

You know Im royalty, right? Diroh said in a charmingly vicious fashion.

She too had seen the mage for what he was, and didnt plan on taking any crap with or without Dallion present. Her attitude, along with the experience as an innkeeper, had made her the perfect judge of character.

A-absolutely, the mage nodded.

Theres no royalty in Learning Hall, Dallion gave her a glance, although a smile had formed on his face. Get on with it, he instructed.

Your hand, please, the mage said.

Before Diroh reacted, the pearl necklace exploded in size, growing into a cloud with wings. With an audible growl, it bared its fangs indicating that it didnt approve of the mage or his methods. To Dallions surprise, the mage didnt show any sign of fear. Although sniveling to more powerful political entitiessuch as the Shimmering Circlehe remained a mage, and as such could easily handle a cloud creature of this type, even an aggressive one.

Skye, the fury said in a sharp tone, causing the creature to pull back. A pair of angry eyes formed on the cloud glaring at the mage, though. My apologies, mage. It wont happen again. She offered her left hand.

Taking hold of it, the mage ran his finger along the back of her palm. Threads of magic were released containing all restrictive instructions that would be bound to her for as long as it remained.

After six months of practical experience, Dallion found the method simple, if not useless. The symbols had the most basic of protections, making them easily decipherable. Not only that, but the connecting threads were too wide and utterly unprotected. One simple severing in any of a dozen spots and the mark would be rendered useless.

Diroh pulled back her hand.

Is that it? she asked, looking at her hand. It was impossible to say whether she could see anything on it.

You'll be given the standard curriculum materials, the rules of Learning Hall, as well as a familiar permit. The mage maintained his smile. Please try to follow them as strictly as possible.

He means don't mess up, Dallion translated. Having a familiar is already an exception. And be thankful you didn't get the same degrading treatment I did. Thank you, he turned towards the mage. We won't be taking any more of your time.

Ignoring the dazzled expressions of children and adults alike, Dallion made his way towards the exit. Halfway there, a pattern of magic symbols emerged in front of him.

The spell was intricate and perfectly executed. It had a large number of fake symbols and dozens of backup thread connections. In a way, it reminded him of the spells that Palag Dallion's first magic instructor had cast. Being at a disadvantage on the magical front, Dallion had resorted to brute force back then, relying on the raw power granted to him by the Moonstone. This time, he no longer had to.

Infusing his thread splitter away with spark, he burst into instances, slicing through the spots which he thought would cause the spell to fizzle. In several cases, the kickback was strong enough to send his instances flying back, as well as cause a substantial amount of pain to all the rest. Still, it didn't take much for him to find the correct approach and undo the spell before it fully formed.

Ha. A girl floated in through the entrance. You're not as terrible as before.

Nice to see you too, Cheska. Dallion said, putting his thread splitter away. He could have told her that even good spells were useless cast so close to a target, but chose to give her this moment. Congrats on completing your apprenticeship.

That's a mage? Diroh asked, intrigued.

Calling Cheska a mage was the same as saying chaos had form. Considered one of the best prodigies in the last decade, the child had advanced to the point that even the rigid structure of the Academy had no choice but to grant her the title. There were two issues with that. Firstly, despite her magic expertise, she remained a child, and that was difficult to change even with dozens of echoes educating her in the various aspects of world knowledge and responsibility. More importantly, she had been, be it unwittingly, part of the former archmage's assassination attempt. Her connection had been tangential. The Azure infiltrators had only taken advantage of her skill to obtain the Moonstones; and while Dallion had managed to effectively destroy two of them and keep the third one for himself, Cheska's stone had managed to find its way into enemy hands. While

never publicly acknowledged, he knew that the White Eye were constantly watching her as were the battle mages.

Di, this is a former classmate of mine, Dallion introduced the girl. Mage Cheska.

We were among the top three novices, not that it matters, Cheska said in false modesty.

Im sure shell tell you all about it, as she guides you through this place.

Shell be teaching me? The fury sounded amused.

Guide, Cheska clarified. Think of me as an older sister.

That would be a bit difficult to imagine.

Not as difficult as you think. Back when Dal was here, he had an age enchantment added to his seal to keep him our age while in the building.

Really? The fury sounded a bit too enthusiastic for Dallions taste. Thats something Ill definitely like hearing about.

In any event, if you have trouble with rules, magic, or such, check with her. The administration building is only for serious matters.

The message was loud and clear: out of everyone at the Academy, Cheska was the one Dallion distrusted the least.

The room that Diroh was given turned out to be the one Dallion had used. No such instructions had been given, although he appreciated the effort. This way, he could share the best route to the dining hall and other important parts of the Learning Hall.

Take this. Dallion gave Diroh a silver ring once they were alone. Wear it at all times.

Disfocus? the fury asked, taking it from him.

Ive got an echo inside. Can you make echoes of your own?

Sure.

Put one here, Dallion pointed at his library ring. That way, hed know everything that was going on at the Learning Hall in his absence.

Both my sister and Eury disliked echoes, Diroh said. They told me you did as well.

I dont dislike them. I just dont use them a lot. Think of this as an emergency. Well be able to talk at any point.

I guess Ill have to make do with a copy of the real thing. Diroh pressed against Dallions ring with her index finger, then moved it off.

An echo of her had appeared within the library of Dallions domain. He didnt intend on sharing that the ring was linked to his personal realm. The echo had already found out and as for the fury herself, she never would.

Youre really harsh when you want to be, the armadil shield said. Are you doing this for her benefit or yours?

Get to know the basics. Ive told Cheska to help get you some artifacts when you need them. Dallion looked at the bathroom. There was a large chunk of water there, ready for use. Dont get into any magic duels. No matter the circumstances.

Youve explained it all before. Diroh sighed. Just go on your secret and important mission, okay? Ill be fine here. With so many ways of you keeping track of me, how could I not be?

Dallion was sure shed find a way, if she hadnt already. He could bet she had at least one blocker item with her right now.

One final thing. While youre here, dont use splitting in public. Since youre my novice, everyone will think youll be able to split into lots of instances. Also

Dal, she interrupted, causing him to pause.

Yes?

Ill be fine. You take care.

## Chapter 768: Power Forging

It was scary how quickly a person got used to comfort. In his mind, Dallion didnt think he was remotely pampered. The last six months had been taxing both mentally and physically. When he wasnt learning, he was chasing after rogues or, on occasion, absorbing vortexes. The artifacts, the tomes of knowledge, even the Academy support hadnt made his life any simpler.

A few days of walking through the wilderness, without a robe or magic, on the other hand, had quickly taught him how unaccustomed he had become to normal life. Back when he was a full-time hunter, walking from Nerosal all the way to the fallen south had been a breeze. It wasnt that the walking tired him, but the fact that he had to do it at all. Every step he took made him think of the time wasted. When spellcraft was involved, he could fly a mile for the same time he made ten steps.

Calm, Dallion kept repeating. He had to be calm.

He took out his vortex finder, in the hope of finding any excuse to shatter the boredom. Sadly, he had no such luck. With a mental sigh, he put the device away again.

At least hed made sure to look like a hunter, if nothing else. The number of rings he was wearing masked his magic completely. Even a mage wouldnt be able to tell he had the trait. Yet while that made things simpler, it also made him a target of wilderness beasts and low-level awakened, even if they had no chance of winning.

Its always difficult letting go of the reins, the armadil shield said.

What? Dallion asked, confused.

*Its an old dryad saying. Means that its never easy to let go of power, luxuries, and comfort. People who retire go through it. Or used to.*

Did you? Dallion asked.

Its been a long time ago, the guardian said. Why dont you rest for a bit? Its been half a day.

Half a day of boredom.

When Dallion had left the citadel, his concerns were remaining undetected and facing Adzorg in enemy territory. He had never considered that just getting there would present such a mental challenge.

Determined to walk through it, he continued for half an hour more, after which he finally succumbed.

Well spend a while here, he told his items.

The area he was in was barren, completely flat for miles. There was no chance a creature would approach unseen, or even at all. Likewise, there was nothing Dallion could hunt.

Ruby, you can stretch your wings. Dallion sat down.

No sooner had he said that than the aether jellyfish popped into existence. Normally, Dallion wouldnt have anything against it. He knew how curious the creature was when it came to the real world. This wasnt the right time, though. Right now, Dallion was supposed to be an ordinary hunter.

No, he said firmly.

*Just a bit, boss?*

Not outside, Dallion replied.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality shifted to Dallions realm. The sun was just rising, its light mixing with the bright glow of the Moonstone crystal cluster. Immediately, Lux appeared with a pop.

Boss! the blue firebird said, flying twice around him.

Nice to see you, Lux. Dallion reached out to pet the creature. Only then did it occur to him how rarely he had done so. Magic had replaced all the abilities the familiar had offered in the past, and as a result of him, as well.

Confused, but also glad, the firebird stopped in place, letting Dallions hand enter the top of its head.

Are you going to try and pass a trial again? Lux chirped.

No, but Ill be here for a while.

The boredom of the real world walk had reminded him of the many skills he had been neglecting. It has also reminded him of something very importanthe didnt need anyones permission to try something on his own.

It took him fifteen minutes to get to his anvil, then another five to move the anvil near the Moonstone. All of his echoes had gathered, watching silently All but Dis. For the moment, she remained in the library.

Wanting to start with something simple, Dallion summoned an ingot of silver, along with the appropriate hammer.

I want to make a dagger, he thought.



Markers appeared all over the chunk of metal, indicating where he had to strike and how. Following the instructions Dallion got to work.

The first dagger took him half an hour to complete. Most of the time was needed to get used to the process once more. No combat splitting was used if Dallion made a mistake, he had to manually fix it over and over again, until he reached the desired result.

Tossing the item on the ground, Dallion summoned another ingot and started again. This time he managed to forge a dagger in ten minutes. It was much better than before, although he still found his actions clunky, not to mention a large number of imperfections remained.

Not breaking a sweat, he summoned a new ingot. By the end of the hour, twenty daggers had been created and tossed away. The rust had effectively fallen off, allowing him to achieve what he envisaged in nearly perfect detail. After completing the final form of the dagger in a matter of minutes, Dallion thought it was time to take it up a notch.

Summoning two ingots, he placed one on the anvil, then cast a spell to keep the other in the air. Rolling up his sleeves, he drew the heat symbol on the floating piece of metal, causing it to melt into a ball of silver. A levitation spell kept it from falling to the ground, yet be ready for use a trick he had learned from the furies in the world of furies.

Hammering the other ingot to a semi-complete shape, Dallion then moved his hand close to the ball of molten metal, using his magic threads to pull part of the scorching liquid. He could feel the heat on his skin, even without being in physical contact.

Just like making potions, he thought.

The difference was that unlike water, it took a lot of effort and reaction speed to add threads of magic in the liquid while constantly casting heat spells to maintain the state of the metal.

A thin line of silver poured onto the blade, containing with it a spell for fire. Not very original, but it didn't have to be.

Casting a faint air current to start reducing the heat, Dallion hammered the spell into the rest of the body, further focusing on the daggers shape. This time, he was using three dozen instances, and he well needed it. Twenty times per second, the spell fizzled out, forcing him to split again and keep going. Bit by bit, the blade moved towards completion until finally it was done.

## **ENCHANTMENT INTEGRATED**

A blue rectangle appeared. Dallion cracked a smile. In the past, he would quench the dagger in oil or water. Being capable of magic, this time he used air currents just as a fury would.

A pity you can't carve a handle for it, Ariel said. The white-haired echo had been ever testier lately, but Dallion could see that he was impressed. Blobs of awe the size of grapefruits were floating within his body, visible thanks to Dallion's music skills.

That's what magic is for. Dallion cast a spell, causing a handle to form beneath the blade.

Grabbing hold of the dagger, he did a few strikes in the air. The balance was well, although the grip could have used a bit more work. That wasn't the point of the exercises, though. After playing

around for a few seconds, Dallion hit the side of the anvil. A yellow flame burst all over the surface of the blade at the moment of contact, enveloping both it and half the anvil.

Not stopping there, Dallion kept striking. The flame grew brighter and brighter, burning Dallions hand in some instances. It was at that point that Dallion stopped. For the first time in quite a while, he felt pleased. If Euryale were here, she would probably tell him that was just the first step.

Its crap, Onda said, arms crossed.

Not expecting such a reaction, Dallion looked at the guardian. The nymph was standing with the echoes, a displeased expression on his face. Based on his visible emotions, he was dying to jump in and explain everything Dallion had done wrong. At the same time, he remained afraid.

It worked, Dallion said in a calm fashion. Thats what counts.

You made an enchantment. Onda grumbled. No! You made a trash potion. Each time part of the knife breaks, the spell is triggered. It wont do crap if you hit something softer. Best thing you can do is stick it into someone and break the blade.

That escalated quickly. Was the nymph talking from experience?

Dallion looked at the blade. In one of his instances, he pricked the tip of his finger. Nothing happened. Not fully convinced, he aimed at the nearest tree he could see and threw the dagger.

The weapon flew through the end, sinking halfway into the trunk with a loud thump. No flames followed. Dallions sense of achievement faded away.

Why? he turned to the nymph.

Youre not mixing forging and magic. You just found a complicated way to enchant a weapon. There was a slight pause. Cool idea. It makes it difficult for the enchantment to be removed. Still is an enchantment, though.

Show me.

There was no response.

Harp, Dallion said loudly. Let him show me. He waited for a bit. If you cant show me, why not him?

Suddenly the tree with the dagger in it burst into flames. Looking closely, Dallion could see that the blade had been cleanly sliced off, releasing the metal potion he had put in it. A column of water fell from the air, enveloping the plant like a jelly prison, then splashed onto the ground.

Do I take that as a yes? Dallion asked.

No, the air nearby vibrated, forming words. He wont teach you, Harp said a few steps away. I will.

You can forge? Dallion wondered. Was that another skill she had hidden from him? There wasnt any such skill mentioned in the harpsiswords rectangle. Then again, spellcasting hadnt been initially present either.

You want to teach me? Dallion looked at her.

Im here to guide you. Came the reply. Even when I think youre following the wrong path.

Why is it wrong?

If I tell you, youll be following my path instead of yours. Several ingots appeared in the air, all of them sea iron. And neither of us will be happy about it.

As philosophical as that sounded, Dallion understood perfectly. The return to forging felt like a distraction while doing something else. Strictly speaking, he hadnt given up forging, he had just stopped actively using it as he had stopped so many other activities. As Nil used to say, there always were distractions; sometimes even the things that could bring the greatest benefit also were distractions on the path to something else. In this case, Dallion wasnt so sure.

Itll help me in the battle to come, Dallion whispered. In all the battles. Im new at magic, so I have to make up for it with something else.

There always was the Moonstone, but he was saving that for later. At some point, it was inevitable hed clash again with his former mage instructor. When that happened, it would take the power of a Moon to win.

What do you really want to learn? Harp asked.

Does it matter?

Even with all the time in your realm, you dont have enough to learn everything. Ill only teach you what you really need for the battle.

That made sense to some degree.

Shapeshifting items, Dallion said. I want to be able to reforge my weapons, so they change form in the real world. Just like Itellas.

Shifting weapons. A second anvil, made entirely of water, appeared next to Dallions. Lets get started.

## Chapter 769: Breaking Out

Magic forging turned out to be a lot easier than Dallion expected. He himself had considered the possibility on a few occasions, though ultimately chose not to pursue it due to the impossibility of executing it. That was the real trick. The first part involved stretching his magic threads through the hammer while shaping the metal. Following the dozens of silver and purple markers took a bit of getting used to. Dallion had to make sure that the correct thickness and intensity of the threads was met before he could even start. Then came the complicated bit. Each time the hammer made contact, Dallion had to twist the ends of the magic thread to form a spell. That had to be done by threads alone since the hammer had also to follow the standing forging instructions. And, of course, if one strike failed, it ruined the entire process.

I need a break, Dallion said after purple sparks burned through the chunk of metal he was hammering.

It had been three days since he had started learning, and while his progress was deemed extraordinary, there was still a bit to be desired. At least now he was close to reaching the desired shape.

The first one is the most difficult, Harp said. After that, its all a matter of practice.

And thats just one part of magic forging?

Yes. It all depends on what you want to achieve.

Can I use this method to create shapeshifting buildings? he asked.

Yes, but I dont know how. Im not an architect.

It wasnt a stretch to assume that the whole concept of magically expanding and transforming space might have been based on this method. At Dallions current magic level, he was able to see some of the threads that went into the spell, though definitely not enough to provide clues regarding the process.

Is there anyone who could make such weapons today?

Yes, Harp replied, to his great surprise. But not at the Academy.

Not at the Academy? What do you mean?

Youve rested enough. try to complete it this time.

Taking the hint, Dallion summoned another ingot. Fifty instances sent magic threads through the hammer, striking the piece of metal at just the right angle. As it did, a spell was imprinted on the metal surface. It wasnt a complicated spell, it didnt have any protection whatsoever. At the same time, it was a partial spell. As Harp had explained, this was different from the standard illusion spells that were commonly used to change appearances in the real world. Rather, it was an iterative spell containing thousands of instructions that reacted to the owners instructions. In many ways, it was the same as computer coding. Back on Earth, Dallion had given it a go, back when he fancied himself the next indie game prodigy. Like most of his attempts at fame, that had ended up in failure. Coding was hard and required a lot of thoughtthings that required a high mind trait.

Magic patterns flashed on the red-hot metal before they were covered by the next. Out of Dallions fifty instances between ten and thirty would mess up, forcing a new split. As time passed, the number gradually increased. The ten became twenty, then thirty. Dallion doubled the amount, but even so after an hour, out of a hundred, only about five would get things right; it wasnt just a matter of the thread patterns being executed well; they had to connect with the previous ones, forming a magical circuit chain of sorts.

Id forgotten how much effort this took, Dallion muttered. He had gotten the shape more or less right. It was crude beyond mention. Harp had told him multiple times that the initial form wasnt of importance when it came to shapeshifting weapons, but all his forging experience told him otherwise, forcing him to craft something remotely usable.

Magic erases effort, the nymph said. And through it the desire for progress.

You could have fooled me. Dallion smirked.

Just a few dozen more, he told himself. It was at this point that he usually messed up. Concentrating, he stretched the limit of his instances to a hundred and fifty. The number of successful cases remained at five.

Keeping track of the patterns strained his eyes. The entire body of the knife was covered with them, and still each next spell had to be applied in exactly the right place.

Five strikes remained. Dallions temples were pulsing. Each of his instances was using magic layer vision, increasing the pain.

Four. Three. Two.

Dont mess up now, Dallion thought.

A hundred and forty-eight instances missed the final hammering, causing the magic threads in the metal to spark out. In the remaining two, though, the hammer hit its target.

## **FORGOTTEN ART RESTORED**

**(+2 Mind, +2 Perception, +2 Reaction, +2 Body, +2 Magic)**

**You have rediscovered one of the forgotten arts. Dont abuse it too much or youll be the one forgotten.**

A blue rectangle emerged. A rush of euphoria went through Dallions bodysomething he had been missing lately. Ever since the magic trait had effectively blocked his leveling up, he had felt something lacking. Initial magic successes and the achievements that came with them had acted as a replacement of sorts, but even that had been months ago. Now, bursts of joy were few and far between. Maybe that was why mages were constantly annoyed, resorting to other means of finding thrills in life.

I thought you couldnt increase magic through achievements, Dallion said, noticing the final part of the reward.

Ive taught you the first step, the harpsisword said, ignoring his question. Ill teach you the rest later.

Im ready now, Dallion insisted.

A smile appeared on the nymphs face.

You sound so much like what you used to be, she said, a note of regret echoing in her words. But youre unable to continue. When youre able to create a shapeshifting item without combat splitting, then

Boss! The aetherfish popped into existence inches from Dallions face. Youre in danger! Theyre attacking!

What? Who? Dallion instinctively summoned his harpsisword. The human form of Harp vanished, as the weapon appeared in his free hand.

I dont know! Theyre moving through time!

Dallion had no idea what that meant, but he didnt intend to find out. Leaving his realm, he quickly returned to the real world. Everything had been just as he remembered it with one major exception. Three figures were running towards him with weapons drawn.

How did they get here? Dallion burst into a hundred instances. There was no time to equip the armadil shield. Instead, he grabbed the harpsisword while casting a flight spell with his left hand.

Ruby, cut them! he shouted.

Before the wind slashes could start, two dozen black chains shot out from the frontmost attacker, flying in the direction of Dallion.

Chainlings! Dallion thought, the fingers of his left hand moving to cast multiple aether shields one after the other.

The barriers proved incapable of blocking the attack, shattering one after the other. Thankfully, then managed to slow it down just enough for Dallion to escape using his flight spell.

It was never a pleasant experience being on the defensive, especially against such opponents. Despite their form, these werent the common variety of cultist creations Dallion had dealt with back in Nerosal. These were fully formed chainlings. No wonder they had been able to approach while Dallion had been in his awakened realm.

Infusing his weapon with spark, Dallion quickly cast a new set of spells. His left hand moved so fast that it created afterimages of twenty fingers in the process. Spheres of magic appeared around all of his itemsboth those on him and on the groundshooting up high in the sky.

Stay put, Dallion said. He didnt want to risk the chainlings consuming them.

More chains shot towards him, like clusters of tendrils.

Spinning in the air, Dallion twisted to evade them, slashing several as they darted past. Thrusting up, he then did a line attack aimed at the creatures.

The ground trembled beneath the force of the blow. Unfortunately, all of the attackers reactions proved just as fast, avoiding the line of destruction.

It was only then that the shardflys wind attacks emerged, pouring down on the furthest of the three figures.

Dont! Dallion cast a protective orb around Ruby, then darted him away from the battlefield. Despite its will, the small creature wasnt a match for them. This was between him and the changelings.

Didnt think thered be monsters in the empire, Dallion said to himself.

With armies on all sides filling the general area, it was insanity for a creature to think it could survive. Suddenly, a thought hit him stronger than a wall of bricks. What if this wasnt accidental? From what he rememberd from the former chief of his village, his grandfather had created chainlings to be used in the War of Inheritance. Would there be a reason for the Azure Federation not to do the same?

Concentrating, Dallion tried to see the skills and traits of the trio. His aether vision allowed him to see their rectangles, but they werent what he expected.

**Species: WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?**

**Class: WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?**

**Health: WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?**

**Traits: WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?**

**Skills: WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?**

**Weakness: WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?**

White letters glowed on a pitch black rectangle.

They aren't anything much, a voice said in Dallion's mind one he hadn't heard in a long time. You just need to concentrate and take them on one at a time.

Voice? Dallion asked.

*I didn't think you'd ever need me again, but it seems you've become confused.*

In what way? Twenty of Dallion's instances darted down at the chainlings, engaging in melee combat. From this distance, his attacks were impossible to evade, but the same could be said for theirs.

Just because they look like humans doesn't mean they are, the voice continued. Or ever were.

Voice, what do you mean? Dallion asked, splitting in fifty new instances.

This time, there was no reply. Dallion still had no idea what the voice was or where it came from. At one point, he believed it to belong to the Moons, but after having enough interactions with them, he was starting to have his doubts. The Moons always made a point to be noticed. Even when they were inclined to provide advice, it was unlikely they'd do so from the shadows. Although there was one possibility.

Astreza, Dallion thought.

The Blue Moon was unlike all the rest. Considered the most powerful Moon, and the one that had gifted awakening itself, it didn't meddle as openly as all the rest. The only time Dallion had even seen it was within the memory fragments of a fury mage. Could it be that the Moon was secretly helping him despite everything?

Launching a series of line attacks, Dallion released magic threads from every pore of his body, covering himself in a protective layer of magic. No sooner had he done so than black blades shot out from one of the chainlings. At this distance they were easy to evade, but they also proved that the creatures were adapting to Dallion's way of fighting. Rather, it was more appropriate to say that they were scouring his skills. Initially, they had taken the simplest approach: tendrils and simple melee attacks. Seeing that those were inefficient, they were resorting to ranged attacks. It was only a matter of time before they started using their actual unique skills.

Always hide your skills, Dallion thought. The same advice had been given to him by everyone from Nil to March herself. Even awakened children knew that. Despite his recklessness, Dallion had tried to abide by that principle, getting better at it with time. However, after all that time, he could see a fatal flaw. Hiding one's skills shifted the focus of development, making people content with what they had learned, even complacent. Maybe it worked for the beings of this world, but for Dallion, it was a burden. After years in this world, and millennia in the

realms, he had acquired all but one set of skills, but was afraid of using them, keeping them hidden as if they were valuable treasures.

You were wrong. He cast a spell to summon his aura sword. Magic threads extended from his hand through the fine blade till they reached its tip.

From now on, he intended to use all his skills all at once. Then, when the world learned of his new abilities, he was going to invent new ones.

Chapter 770: Chainling Combat

Music, Dallion thought as he slashed at a chainling ten feet away.

The harpissword vibrated during the attack, sending strands of sound at its target. There was no longer the need for Dallion to hold it like a guitar once he had freed his mind to the possibilities, the number of options had exploded.

The strands barely made contact with the void matter that composed the entity, but during that moment, the spark was able to cause significant damage. From the side, it seemed as if the sword was sending out bolts of lightning.

### **CRITICAL STRIKE**

**Damage has been increased by 200%**

A purple rectangle popped up for a moment before swiftly fading away.

Keeping up his momentum, Dallion twisted in the air, slashing the space with his aura sword. Spell circles emerged as he did, sending a rain of projectiles at the already stunned target.

Jets of void matter shot out from the chainling, in a desperate attempt to form a protective bubble of blackness around it. While some of the aether projectiles were swallowed by the sticky surface, the rest ripped through, causing holes in the creature behind.

Shrieks filled the air. No longer aiming to attack, the being pulled back in its attempt to flee. However, it was already too late. Combining a slight spell with a speed symbol, Dallion thrust towards his enemy, slicing him in two with a spark infused line strike.

### **CONTRADICTION**

**(+2 Body, +2 Mind)**

**Spark and magic generally don't mix. That's why using them both in battle is such a sight.**

The achievement bled through into reality thanks to Dallion's magic trait. It remained slightly concerning seeing awakened elements in the real world, though the rush of adrenaline drowned that fear, making him ready for more.

Are you the new Star candidates? Dallion asked, twisting around in the air, avoiding the multitude of tentacles that shot at him.

The attackers' initial attempt had been to surround him on all sides, then tighten the loop, leaving him to defend against attacks from every direction. There were a few moments during which the distance between them had been uneven, and that proved more than enough for Dallion to focus and



destroy one of the trio. The unfortunate creature had mistakenly believed that the otherworlder was attempting to escape, and moved further forward to prevent him from doing so. As was evident, that had turned out to be a mistake.

Swords danced in front of Dallion, combining spark and magic. The harpsisword slashed through the black tentacles, while the aura sword cast dozens of spells in this case, aether barriers behind it.

Are you even hopefuls? Dallion added some music threads to his voice as he spoke. After all, it wasn't only objects that could be imbued with spark. His entire body overflowed with it. Or are you just hired help sent by Grym to stop me?

Bolts of lightning flew out of his mouth, zapping at the chainling pair. These two were a lot better prepared, easily topping his attacks with their shifting void matter.

A bolt wrapped in blue flames split the air, hitting one of the chainlings straight in the back of the head. Although far less efficient than Dallion, Lux, too, had joined in the fight. Following its master's orders, the guardian would keep its distance, shooting its single bolt at the entities. Usually, the blue flame had allowed the bolt to pierce through void matter, then fly back. Not this time, though.

Careful, Lux. Dallion immediately severed the link between the bladebow bolt and his realm. We don't want a realm invasion.

Sorry, the firebird let out a sad chirp and flew away from the fight. The real world wasn't his battlefield.

Clusters of black tendrils shot out from the two chainlings. Unlike all the previous times, though, they weren't aimed at Dallion, but at each other. Black lines formed, creating a large and intricate pattern.

No, you don't! Dallion let out a series of line attacks with his harpsisword. He knew perfectly well what the creatures were planning to do.

As a rule, void matter and magic didn't mix. Each had the power to annihilate the other, and in normal circumstances, it did. When it came to magic, though, there always were exceptions. The chaining in Dallion's first hunt had been capable of spellcasting. Most likely, the unfortunate human the void matter had consumed had been a rogue mage or apprentice of some sort. While it wasn't clear whether any of the ones he was fighting now were, they had the means to cast spells and were doing so by creating a seven-circle pattern using their void tendrils.

Waves of pitch-black projectiles poured out of the spell circle before Dallion's line attack could reach it. Knowing that he couldn't take on the hit directly, the battle apprentice burst into fifty instances, all flying in different directions. Even with the vast number of speed boost and aether barriers his aura sword let him cast, over three quarters of his instances were obliterated.

Damned magic Gatling gun, Dallion thought.

If this were an awakened realm, he could have Lux return the attack in kind. Here, he had to be clever about it.

The spells he was casting with the sword changed. Barriers were useless now, so he reverted to indirect attacks. Keeping ahead of the chainlings' torrent of blades, Dallion sent out dozens of magic

blades into the sky. The aether weapons flew up, then changed course, targeting the void creatures along a wide arc.

The battle shifted to an artillery clash. Both sides were using magic to bombard the other while simultaneously shielding themselves from getting hit. In the case of Dallion, he relied on speed and agility to evade the void projectiles, although that made it impossible to near the chainlings themselves.

Thats wicked! Onda said in Dallions realm. Why dont you do more stuff like that?

Because Im in no hurry to get killed, Dallion replied. Still, he couldnt deny he enjoyed it. Breaking loose felt as if hes torn the first few layers of his cocoon and was finally starting to stretch his wings.

Layers of void matter poured upwards from the chainlings, forming a protective semi-sphere. Similar to the gatling gun it moved in the direction of the greatest threat, absorbing all aether blades that attempted to disrupt their spell. Clearly, this wasnt an approach that would bring him victory.

Concentrate, Dallion told himself.

The strength of the chainlings lied in the amount of void matter. If the third one was still alive, it would have made things even more difficult, potentially maintaining three void spells, along with the other two. For Dallion to win, he had to do one of two things: either kill off one of the remaining creatures, or break the link between them. So far, he had focused on using strength and sneakiness, to no avail. Another option was to use strength and strength.

Here goes, Dallion said beneath his breath, and used the aura sword to increase his speed further.

The black projectiles trailed slightly behind, giving him a moment of pause. This was precisely what he wanted. Gripping both blades tightly, he let out a double line attack aimed at the chainlings.

Two lines of destruction, one white and one purple, flew forward, crossing the space between enemies within seconds. It was at this point that the lack of experience in the chainlings showed.

The proper approach would have been for them to evade the attack. Instead, a thick wall of black substance rose in front of them. The nature of the void matter allowed the projectiles to pass through unimpeded, but it also made the pair a lot less maneuverable. Eyes emerged all over its surface, maintaining visual contact with Dallion just in time to see him follow up with dozens of point attack with both swords.

*How do you like this?*

Spark and magic filled the air, melting away the void projectiles. The void wall trembled, unprepared to meet such devastating force. At first, the wall managed to take on the blows, devouring them, as they hit. Gradually, cracks formed, quickly filled up by thousands of small tendrils. Even that proved unsustainable, though, leading to the entire wall being torn apart like a block of wet clay. The points of force continued on, slicing through the magic pattern, and a large part of the ground itself, forming large craters.

Got you! Dallion darted forward. Now that he was no longer targeted, nothing stopped him from focusing on one specific enemy.

From all his time spent as a hunter, Dallion knew to always focus on the most scared prey. There was a time when he thought that to be counterintuitive, but as he had seen when it came to real life, time was always of greatest importance.

Coating his sword with spark, Dallion thrust it into the black form of the chainling. Eyes appeared all over the creatures surface, moving wildly in pain.

Vibrate, Dallion whispered. The blade of his harpsisword reacted. The spark protecting it from the effects of the void, it ate through the entity within a fraction of a second, causing it to burst like a water balloon. Blotches of void matter splashed onto Dallion, attempting one final attack. The protective coating of magic threads quickly incinerated them before they could do any harm. It was one-on-one now.

Briskly, Dallion turned around. He expected an attack to greet him, but that didnt happen. In fact, there was no trace of the last creature.

Lux, any idea where the last one went? Dallion split into instances.

If this were a forest or even a hilly area, he could accept the chainling dashing out of view. In the probably flattest place in the world, that seemed exceedingly unlikely.

Its nowhere, boss, the firebird replied.

It cant be nowhere. Flying higher up, Dallion used his magic layer vision to examine the ground for magic threads. Like in most of the wilderness, they were pretty much non-existent. It was quite possible for the chainling to have gone underground. For all Dallion knew, it could be running away right now. If that were the case, he would be rather pleased. Unfortunately, something told him that it wasnt over.

Waving his aura blade along a circular arc, he cast thirty aether blade circles, each raining dozens of purple weapons onto the ground below. Such weak attacks were by no means capable of doing any damage whatsoever, but with a bit of luck they could stir things up, causing the chainling to react.

Seconds passed. Dallion waited for the spells to end, then examined the ground again.

Any advice you can give me, Harp? he asked.

Dont leave yourself unguarded, the nymph replied. She sounded slightly taken aback by the fashion in which the chainlings had approached as well. One of the key principles of the world was that while in an awakened realm, time in the real world remained still. Having an exception changed everything to its core.

Have you seen anything of the sort before?

*No. Never.*

A chill passed down Dallions spine. Could it be that he was too late and Adzorg had already completed his device? If that were the case, there was nothing anyone could do. At best, all existing mages could gather together and establish a city in the sky. Once again, the cloud forts would become the only places of civilization, while the land was overrun by Starspawn and cultists.

You're not too late, Harp said in a calming fashion. If the void had broken through, there would be no sky.

That's a relief. And yet, if three creatures had managed to achieve what they had, others would as well. Maybe it was safe to avoid entering realms for a while, at least until he figured out what was going on.

Suddenly, a cone of void matter burst up from the ground. It was no more than fifty feet high, nowhere near to reaching Dallion. Alas, it didn't emerge alone. A hand of stone, the size of a town, followed, breaking through the ground as if it was the crust of a pie.

Bursting into Instances, Dallion flew further up, observing the scene from sixty different perspectives.

A second hand shot out some half a mile from the first. Both extended upwards, then slammed down, grabbing hold of the barren earth.

Oh crap, Dallion whispered. Before his very eyes, a colossus was pulling itself out of the soil, and not the human-sized variety either. The only times Dallion had seen anything similar were during his awakened trials. The difference was that in this fight, he wouldn't be getting any assistance from the Moons.