

Leveling up 781

Chapter 781: Battle for Absorption

Black tendrils quickly shot out from both parts of the giant chainling, stitching it whole again. Simultaneously, an explosion of shards erupted from its shoulder, flying in the direction of the vortex guardians. The duo quickly cast a series of aether barriers, while dozens of wasps flew in an attempt to provide additional protection. Even so, one of the twins was struck, his life total decreasing by another three percent.

Just three percent? Dallion thought.

The shard was the side that could destroy a castle in the real world. Hed seen crossbows capable of less damage, and still, it had only decreased the guardians health by a minuscule amount.

What to do? The gears in his mind were already turning.

He knew that he couldnt get out of the vortex without defeating the guardians. Yet even taking advantage of the chainlings interference, he stood no chance in winning; none of his group did. Back when he was young and nave, he might have taken them on just for the heck of it, believing hed get lucky. Hed thought he could take on March during his guild admission trial, after all. Now, he was more experienced and knowledgeable, and it was that that provided a potential solution. It was still a gamble, but the only chance he had.

Harp, get ready, he said. Di, Nil, Ill need you as well.

Whats your plan? Adzorg asked, ignoring the manner in which he had been addressed.

We go for the weaker twin, Dallion said. After were done, Ill absorb him and take on the other. There was a moment of hesitation. If everything else fails, Ill use the Moonstone to defeat him.

Youre assuming we can win against the weaker one. The old man stroke his chin.

Thats our only chance.

Why not just wait for them to exhaust each other? The fury asked. In the distance, giant eyes and mouths had covered the chainling rendering it grotesque as well as menacing. That way youll just take on one.

Hes playing the odds, the old mage explained. If the weaker twin dies, he wouldnt be able to absorb it. That way hell remain at his current level even if theres only one guardian to face.

Dallion nodded.

How do we get there? Diroh wasnt convinced. Well have to fight through all that...

Ill take care of it. Dallion gripped the hilt of his harpsisword. Just be ready to do.

Water covered his harpsisword, causing the weapon to double in size.

Astreza, Berannah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Dallion recited beneath his breath. Lux, lets go!

Blue wings of fire erupted as the firebird emerged, engulfing its owner in flames.

Music and spark attack, Dallion thought as his familiar propelled him forward.

The harpsisword vibrated not merely its strings, but the entire watery surface, sending out strands of light in all directions. A sense of pressure ran through Dallions arm, though not nearly as intense as before. This time, the nymph guardian was doing her best to alleviate the burden; Dallions recently boosted magic trait did the rest.

Similar to the chainling, Dallions attack pierced creatures in the dozens. The spark had the same effect on chainlings as it did on aether wasps, creating a safe area around him.

Keep up! he shouted as he swung his harpsisword once more.

The second attack was as destructive as the first, causing the vortex to react. One of the twins looked in Dallions direction, then at the chainling.

Come on. Dallion held his breath. Be logical.

That was a phrase he had used a lot during his gaming days back on Earth. It was also the one that irritated him the most. The one certainty in gaming was that if there were human opponents, there was a way for them to mess everything up. Countless times he had seen strategies fail because someone was too stupid to see an obviously good move and charge wildly doing utter nonsense. That never brought them victory, but it messed Dallions strategy to the point that he lost as well. The hope was that the vortex would be less chaotic, and a lot more reasonable.

Since Dallion had already presented himself as a series threat that was beyond mere minions, the logical next step was for one of the guardians to intervene. And here lay the problem. If they had determined him to be a greater threat than the chainling, the stronger twin would go to face him.

That was the last thing Dallion wanted. So, just to make sure, he followed the popular saying: pick or be picked.

Lux, get me there! He pointed at the weaker guardian as he split into a hundred instances.

The firebird propelled him through the air like a bullet. By the time he did his third music attack, Agenelin Murser was already in range.

A moment of doubt passed through Dallion as the strands shot out in all directions. The guardian had been human once in a manner of speaking he still was banished to protect the world from anything that could harm it. Killing him was no thanks, yet in order to escape, Dallion didn't have any choice.

Part of the chainling was also pierced by the attack, although for him, they were little more than needles red hot needles. Annoyed, the creature severed them with a series of tentacles that emerged from his mass. The guardian, on the other hand, reacted in a very different fashion.

Having the needed speed and perception, it summoned a tower shield of aether just before the moment of impact. Dozens of threads bounced off, causing negligible damage in the process.

Unwilling to let it end here, Dallion did another attack.

CRITICAL HIT

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

DAZED EFFECT

AETHERFLY FAMILIAR has been dazed

AETHERFLY FAMILIARs actions will be performed at 50% speed for the next ten seconds.

Two purple rectangles appeared as the cluster of glowing strands managed to drill a few holes within the shield.

That was a familiar? Dallion asked.

You have shields, they have shields, the armadil shield said.

A split second later, the vortex guardans shield sprouted wings, transforming into a massive shardfly. Dallion reacted on instinct. Gripping both swords, he spun in the air. One sword did a line infused spark attack while the other left several black hole pearls in its wake.

The guardian didnt, in turn, countered with a line attack of its own. Thunder rippled the air as both attacks negated each other.

Meanwhile, the chainling also attempted to take advantage of the situation. A giant arm emerged from its mass, reaching for Dallion and the weaker twin. Before it could get close, the pearls that Dallion had left falling to the ground changed direction, piercing its hand like bullets. While not as potent against any aether creations, the orbs of purple still sucked in large amounts of void, then exploded, causing purple blisters to pop all over the black surface.

I thought I was the careless one! Diroh shouted from behind, launching several clusters of unadulterated ice at the chainling in an effort to attract more wasps there.

Dallion smiled faintly, then performed two three-sixty line attacks. To his surprise, the guardian did the same, but not aiming at him, but rather the chainlings arm.

Moderately strong individually, the attacks stacked on, causing a large chunk of the mass to fall off. A music attack took care of the rest, disintegrating the void matter to dust.

We shouldnt be fighting, the guardian said, his voice was calm and high pitched, with a certain allure to it.

Quite a reasonable request. Given the situation, most would even be tempted to agree. However, they wouldnt be able to see the music threads attempting to influence the listeners.

I didnt see you having music. Dallion countered the effects with his own music skills. Hidden abilities?

Magic. The other slashed at him, while the large shardfly directed a torrent of wind slashes at Dallions torso.

Of course, Dallion parried with his harpsisword. Always magicthe eternal exception and explanation for everything.

The water on his weapon expanded, taking on the attacks like a shield, then shot them back. Slivers of water split the air, faster than Dallion could keep up.

FATAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 500%

FATAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 500%

Clusters of purple rectangles appeared in the air, stacking up near the vortex guardians familiar. Several of its wings cracked and shattered under the pressure. Harp had quickly made it clear that the time for games was over.

Once again, Dallion was glad that she was on his side.

You're fighting the wrong enemy, the guarding twin continued flying towards Dallion with a series of arc slashes. The more void enters the world, the more chaos it will cause for everyone.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

Seeing the red rectangle made Dallion almost feel nostalgic. It had been a while since opponents had been able to hit him this easily. It also reminded him how vulnerable he was. Lux would be able to deal with twenty percent quickly, but if the guardian managed to put five hits in, Dallion was all but done for. The issue was that with his speed and technique, five successive hits didn't seem impossible.

Will you let us out if we help you kill the chainling? Dallion responded with several attacks of his own. The trail of spells the aura sword left behind was purely for distraction purposes; and since they caused next to no damage, completely ignored by the guardian who kept pressing on.

I can't, the twin replied. Several of his pieces of armor were shattered due to Harp's ferocity, but each time an aura segment was smashed, a new one emerged to take its place. There's void inside you.

Yes, there's void in all of us. Dallion mentally told Nox to pull back and increase the distance between them.

No. The guardian followed. Just you. If I let you go, you'll cause as much chaos as the void, maybe more.

You think I'm the Star? I killed the Star! Dallion gritted his teeth. I work for the Archbishop of the Seven Moons!

The most exalted has given you a chance to repent. I'll obey his command and cleanse your soul so you might emerge again unblemished.

By absorbing me?!

You'll join my strength and become part of the shield that protects this world from the void. Can there be any better reward?

There was too much wrong in that for Dallion to answer. Sadly, he had to admit that he was outclassed. His skills, gear, and especially Harp provided a huge advantage, but even so, the difference in magic level was noticeable. Traits gave Dallion an advantage almost everywhere else, but magic was too overpowered for the situation.

If you kill me, colossi will return to the world.

The comment made the guardian pause for a fraction of a second. It wasn't much, but enough to tell Dallion that it was aware of the creatures and the danger they posed.

You're lying.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

The intensity of the attacks increased.

Someone is building a device that could break the barriers between worlds, Dallion said. With it, he can bring back many things to the world, even the void. Naturally, there was no point in telling that the person in question was the other mage of Dallion's group.

Only the Moons can move people between worlds.

Kill me and you'll see how wrong you were, Dallion shouted. I know you can tell I'm not lying. Do you think I just made that up?

Suddenly, the harpsword moved on its own accord. Guiding Dallion's hand, it struck the guardian in the breastplate, but instead of smashing it as before, the layer of water flowed along him, surrounding the twin like in a cage. Streams of purple all over its surface, as if the magic was dissolving.

Strike! Harp said.

As she did, a targeting marker emerged right on the side of the guardian's chest.

Chapter 782: Exalted of the Past

The moment Dallion struck, a surge of magic rushed up the blade into him.

PATRIAL ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 30

Partial absorption? Dallion wondered.

This was new in more ways than one. Harp must have done something for the attack to drain magic instead of dealing damage. Just like the mage duels back at the Academy. The difference was that, as far as he had been taught, an agreement between the participants was necessary.

Of course! A smile formed on Dallion's face. The laws of the Moons didn't apply here. As long as he was in the vortex, he could use any methods he wished. Equivalently, all methods could be used on him something to keep in mind.

The expression of the twin guardian suddenly shifted. The calm, almost statuesque, expression was replaced by that of a normal person. A speck of relief shone through the layers of purple.

Ceasing his attack, the guardian pulled back, splitting into ten instances of his own.

Dallion did the same, adding twenty more instances to his usual splits.

Nine instances of the twin charged forward, his attackers faster and more vicious than before. Just at first glance, one could see three skills being combined in the process. The last instances, however, kept its distance at ten feet from Dallion.

You're an otherworlder, the instance said, in a voice much different from before.

Dallion could feel Harp's desire to take this opportunity to go all out at the instance, possibly even urging him to force that outcome into reality. At the same time, he could still see emanations of longing and reluctance coming from his opponent; to be more precise, only from that specific instance of his opponent.

Dont hesitate, Harp said.

The right thing was to listen to her. Or was it? Hundreds more of Dallion's instances were flying about, fighting the guardian as well, also keeping an eye on the other fights. For the moment, everything was going as well as predicted. The giant chainling had engaged the other guardian twin, while Adzorg and Diroh were engaging in any rogue wasp that ventured to approach Dallion from behind.

Sorry, Harp, Dallion thought. I can spare one instance.

What about you? he asked. Were you one?

No. The guardian laughed. I'd seen a lot. They used to be common before I was exalted. Not anymore, it seems.

Exalted? Dallion asked.

The fighting instances of the guardian were pushing him back, but in one case, Harp managed to strike another target marker.

PATRIAL ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 31

Good approach, the talking instances noted. I don't think it'll help you, though.

Not worried?

Why? The twin shrugged. I'll still win. The voidling is attracting all my attention. Once its destroyed, I'll focus on you and even your nymph guardian won't be able to present a match.

Is that why you're chatting with me? To gloat?

I'm talking to you because I can. Exaltation is a gift and duty, but it's a life of solitude. Everything sad has been said. Only when the void tries to breach into the world, do we get to glimpse a part of it.

We? So, there are others like you?

The Order has exalted thousands. If one falls, two must take their place.

There it was again—the shiver that went down Dallion's spine. There was no doubt that the Order had the means to banish people, or exalt as the twin referred to it. Most likely, they presented it as a

blessing or some sort, the highest goal that could be bestowed upon an exalted. From a certain point of view, it probably was.

PATRIAL ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 32

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 50%

Two rectangles popped up simultaneously. The wound was serious but Dallion had no choice but to have it become reality. The greater his magic trait, the better he got to see the weaknesses within the guardians armor.

You could have joined the Order, the talkative instance continued.

Im working for the Order, Dallion insisted. When were you exalted?

During the second Conquest War. He paused for a moment. During the era of nymphs, he added.

PATRIAL ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 33

Another point was absorbed, but Dallions attention was elsewhere. The order had banished the guardian all the way back during the era of nymphs? That meant that other than the Pan and Harp, this might turn out to be the oldest mortals he had met. Furthermore, it proved that the Order existed in some form even back then, and had the power to banish people.

Its a pity you have to die, the twin sighed. You sound like youre telling the truth, and if youre an otherworlder youd have helped fight the void in the real world.

Then let me go.

Youre a mage, you know the rules. Nothing can get out of a vortex unless it consumes its heart.

The rules have changed a bit since your time.

No, they havent. The guardians tone became deadly serious. And you dont have the tools to use an exception.

Several miles away, the giant chainling burst in an army of normal sized versions of itself. Seeing that its size provided no advantage to the stronger twin, it apparently decided to rely on quantity. That seemed only to make the guardians task easier. With a zig-zag slash attack, it flew through the armies, slashing them by the dozen. In contrast only one single chainling attack managed to land, reducing the twins health by a percent.

He was almost like you when he was exalted, the weaker twin told Dallion. So determined to become a noble that he almost lost his chance. If I hadnt been selected, he might have even left.

I thought humans couldnt become nobles back then.

They could, yet only through the Order. The nymphs and the furies were guarding all the shrines. The dryads scoured the wilderness, hunting for ruins that still had any. Thats why we joined the Order to protect the world and the human race in its time of need.

The harpsword in Dallions hand lashed out, shooting a jet of water in the direction of the twins talking instance. The water twisted around like a drill head. Before it could reach its target, a sword of magic emerged in the guardians hand. Several octagonal patterns formed in the airspells, but far more different than the type Dallion knew. They were like a precursor to modern magic with clusters of symbols, but no circles.

As the jet of water smashed through them, it become slower and slower, until it was barely moving. Then, the twin struth it, severing the barely visible threads of magic that gave the liquid its strength. The front of the jet exploded into fine spray, evaporating an inch away from the aether armor.

Suddenly, Dallion realized that he wasnt taking part in a fight. Even against the weaker one he never had a chance. The guardian was only prolonging the fight, so he could have his conversation.

Harp had been right all along. The reason for her bloodlust wasnt born out of her desire to slaughter the twin, but to protect Dallion.

I told you you cant win. The guardian shook his head, leaving the aether sword to disappear once more. Tell me, what is the world like? Have humans joined the strong races?

Looking at the information rectangle, the twins health was still above ten percent. If the chainling died, as the guardian claimed it would, thered be no hope.

Yes, Dallion said. He knew that he was going to change his strategy. Were the strongest race left.

I knew it would happen, and still it was so difficult to believe.

Even the war now is between human empires. Mostly.

And the Order?

The Order is always neutral Nox, buddy, youll have to go through some pain. Can you handle that?

Within Dallions realm, the crackling snarled in the affirmative.

Its still helping all those in need, Dallion continued. There are more monasteries every year.

All over the globe?

This world is a globe? Only in the known world so far, but they are always moving further.

Several of Dallions instances flew to Diroh and Adzorg. Knowing that his allies could see them, he whispered a single word in front of them. With a bit of luck, they would have managed to make it and do as he asked.

I killed the Star, Dallion said. A star, he quickly corrected himself.

The Stars The guardian frowned. When I was still in the world I thought they were the greatest enemy there was. After my exaltation I saw they were just a nuisance.

In what way?

Stars come and go. They only bring chaos out of envy, but can never destroy the world.

You havent met anyone like the Star Ive been dealing with. Not to mention that they caused the banishment of entire races. What about the colossi? Are they a nuisance as well?

Theyre not a problem of the world. Not anymore, the being said with absolute conviction. Theyll never be let back.

Unless the barriers are weakened.

PATRIAL ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 34

Another successful hit. Was the twin so confident that he had allowed himself to be hit five times? Dallion had heard that some people wanted to live on the edge, but this was too much. One more successful absorption hit and the vortex would be consumed, bringing to the guardians death. Just to be sure, he glanced at the info rectangle once more. The value of the magic trait remained at sixty, as it was supposed to be.

Do you want me to win? Dallion asked.

No, the other replied.

Then why give me all the hits?

The first one you did on your own. The rest are just a way to illustrate how helpless you are. An outsider with void within, a crippled old man, and a fury that isnt a fury. Only the Moons themselves can help you get out of here alive.

Dallion said nothing. He really didnt want to resort to using the Moonstone, but it seemed like he had no choice. Before that, though there were a few more hands he had to play.

Its never over until its over he told himself.

What is the Eighth Moon? he asked.

The question brought an explosion of fear within the guardian, one far stronger than Dallion expected.

There is no Eighth Moon, he whispered.

Ive seen it, Dallion said. Gem, count to five and show up next to Di, he added mentally in his realm.

There never was an Eighth Moon! the guardian shouted. Lies to keep the faithful away from the deities!

All but one of the twins instances erupted in rage. Weapons Dallion had never seen emerged within their hands, all made of aether: halberds with triple chained daggers instead of blades, scythes with heads as large as a crescent moon, even a crossbow that held eight sets of bolts.

Strikes and projectiles flew at Dallions instances, all reinforced by the twins octagonal spells. It was at that point that Gem emerged.

Got you! Dallion thought and forced reality.

All of the armed instances of the guardian vanished, leaving only the talking one present. Dallion struck forward with his harpsisword again, letting Harp shoot another jet of water. Meanwhile, he drew his aura sword back, as if preparing for a line attack. However, that never happened. Threads of magic shot from the tip of the sword, flying towards the person who had just appeared there Adzorg.

The guardian drew his sword, evaporating the water attack with one strike.

Keep the wasps occupied, dear girl, Adzorg said as he weaved a completely new type of spell. It was a lot larger than the ones he'd done in the past, also the shape wasn't circular as was standard, but cubic.

New layers of aether armor appeared around the guardian. Like massive slabs of hardened light they completely encased him, making him invulnerable for attack. His usual aether sword disappeared, replaced by one three times larger.

Now, Dallion saw why his opponent wasn't worried about having the final vortex point absorbed. It would take dozens of spark attacks to break through that shell, maybe more. Walking a thin line between hope and defeat, he struck forward with his harpsisword once more, performing a multi-attack.

You can't win, the twin said, darting forward straight at the jets of water.

Dallion held his breath. Just then, Adzorg completed his spell.

The cube he was casting turned solid. Thousands of poles shot from its sides, growing in size as they moved forward. Bending around Dallion, like jaunt arc, they focused on the vortex guardian, striking him from the sides.

The twin instinctively performed a slashing motion with his sword, aiming to shatter the new constructs. To his surprise the blade stopped at the first one, incapable of continuing.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage increased by 200%

Hundreds of rectangles emerged as the massive pieces of armor were shattered one after the other. The guardians made an attempt to replace them with new ones, but as many as he created, more were shattered by the merciless poles.

Dallion concentrated, carefully observing every inch of the twins armor, waiting for the targeting marker to appear. Two seconds later it did.

PATRIAL ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 35

MAGIC TRANSFER

Level 6 Vortex has absorbed 1 magic from Level 9 Vortex.

Level 9 Vortex has been converted to a Level 8 Vortex

DUAL VORTEX ABSORPTION

(+2 PERCEPTION)

You have managed to absorb magic from both parts of a double vortex. Good start. Now you just have to survive and see it through.

Oh, Crap! Dallion thought.

Chapter 783: A Game of Devouring

Told you. The vortex guardian struck the poles that pinned him from both sides. This time, several of them snapped.

I dont think this will be as efficient as before, dear boy, Adzorg said, weaving a second cube spell. Id suggest a tactical retreat.

Dallion slashed twice more with his harpsisword, but even in the process of doing so, Lux pulled him back. The firebird instinctively felt the threat emanating from the guardian and wanted to get as far away from it as possible.

PARTIAL ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 36

One of the attacks hit, but at this point, magic was the last thing on Dallions mind.

You didnt tell me they could absorb one another! Dallion shouted as he performed a music spark attack.

Threads of light burst from the harpsisword striking the guardian along with any unfortunate aether wasp in a five-hundred-foot radius.

Dozens of red rectangles emerged, but even after all that, the guardians health just fell down to eight percent. As Adzorg had said, the vortex was adapting and the guardians along with it.

Sadly, that wasnt the greatest issue. The other twin had also broken out of its robotic state. Splitting into twenty instances, it plowed through the chainlings like melting snow. His actions, just like his expression, were a lot more human-like, as if having a point of magic absorbed had woken him up.

Im an idiot! Dallion gritted his teeth. The reason his opponent had allowed him so many free strikes wasnt just to chat. Now both twins were conscious, which brought the battle to a whole different level.

Dont! Adzorg said, flying next to Dallion.

Dont what?

Dont use the Moonstone. Youll never get another.

Dallion was about to ask what other option there was when it came to him. There was one alternative leftone that he had been using for millennia until the rebellion at the Academy. What the old man was proposing was to guide him once again from within his awakening realm.

You want me to let you inside. Dallion looked at him.

You have the strength, I have the knowledge. Until we combine the two, we dont stand a chance, even if I use your magic threads to cast spells.

I dont want a symbiote!

It wont be! I vow by the Moons I wont influence you or invade your realm. Once we escape the vortex, Ill be out of your realm.

There was undoubted logic in the offer, but after what Dallion had seen, he was more than a bit reluctant. Symbiotic echoes were able to transform children into highly experienced mages and fighters, but they also took complete control of a person.

Harp, what do you think? He asked.

I can protect your realm, the nymph said without hesitation.

Should I do it?

There was no response.

Harp?

I cant give you advice on this. Do what you think is best. Ill stand by you either way.

The harpsiswords words suggested that there could be an alternative way of dealing with this. The twin Dallion had been fighting had claimed the opposite. The nymph hadnt confirmed that. On the other hand, she hadnt been vehemently opposed to Adzorgs plan.

Damn it all! Go for it! Dallion flew to the old mage and grabbed his hand. Instantly, an echo appeared in his realm. Dont touch the Moonstone! Dallion hissed beneath his breath.

Dear boy, I wouldnt dream of it, the echo said. Now just relax a bit and try to get a sense of what Im doing. Youll need it once this is over.

Why?

Do you seriously think this will be the only vortex?

The way he said it made Dallion shudder. In the grand scope of things, everything he had gone through in the last few hours was nothing but an insignificant speck of reality. The capital of a dwarven kingdom might well be destroyed as a result. Possibly the entire kingdom was doomed, but that was just one incident. If Adzorg continued to meddle with his device, there would be many more. In fact, there already was evidence that they were going to occur. All the gleams that had been on the front were proof of that. Vortexes with levels in the double digits meant that the layer was weakened to such an extent that only the strongest banished exalted had a chance of keeping it whole.

You

Relax, the echo interrupted. I give you my vow that well talk immediately after were out of here.

It wasnt the best offer, but for the moment, it would have to do.

Im not taking control. Im just showing you what to do.

And how would that work?

Just follow the markers.

No sooner had he said that than markers appeared in front of Dallion. Similar to schematics showing him what to do and how to do it. Unlike the usual markers, though, there were notes within every line of notes that someone with the magic trait could see.

You sneaky old man, Dallion thought.

If his mind trait had been any less, he wouldn't have been able to remember everything he was seeing. It also helped that he had good enough reactions to copy it. There was only one minor setback Adzorg could only help in regards to spells. Dallion still had to deal with the actual combat himself.

Here goes nothing. He started casting the suggested spell.

Dozens of instances were killed off every second as the vortex guardian charged at Dallion. The desire for a calm conversation had gone, replaced by a desire to erase him from existence. Only a sliver of curiosity was left, and that was precisely what Dallion focused on with his music skills.

The Order isn't as strong as it once was, he lied, as Harp increased the water covering the harp's sword. Kingdoms and empires rule the world now.

They used to say that in the past, too. The Order is still here, the empires aren't.

Did Star cultists infiltrate the Order in your time? Completing the spell with his aura sword, Dallion let it go.

Wings of aether extended from the spell-oval he had formed, then burst into feathers doing absolutely nothing.

What? Where did I go wrong?

He asked in his realm.

That's supposed to happen, Adzorg assured him. Focus on the next spell.

Why am I casting spells that do nothing?

What were doing, dear boy, is casting composite spells. We need to prepare the groundwork before we can do any actual harm.

Do it faster!

In the distance, the voidling army had been reduced to a few hundred members. Even chainlings that had nothing to do with the giant fight were swarming, feeding it with their own void matter. The aether wasps had also changed their behavior. Sensing weakness, they had stopped focusing on Dallion and his group, swarming to surround what void remained.

I saw one of them personally. Dallion filled his voice with doubt, while simultaneously casting another music attack.

Neither of his attempts succeeded. Ignoring his words, the guardian twin slashed through the music strands as if they were cobwebs, then pierced Dallion's right shoulder.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 50%

Out of all instances, there wasn't a single one that fared better. In some cases, the wound had even managed to pierce him through the chest, resulting in an instant kill.

Lux! Dallion shouted, completing the second spell.

This time beams of magic shot in all directions, creating a mesh between Dallion and the guardians.

Get close to Diroh! Adzorg said.

You could have said that earlier! Dallion frowned. Thankfully, the firebird was already on it, thrusting Dallion to where the fury was.

From here on, stay close, he whispered.

What about the wasps? she asked.

Forget the wasps.

Like lasers reflecting in mirrors, the beams bounced off invisible points in the sky, creating a mesh everywhere around. The guardians attempt to cut through resulted in his sword being severed in the process, earning him another one percent in damage.

No time for complacency, dear boy, Adzorg urged. Keep on casting!

The entire environment of the vortex swirled, reacting to the previous spell. The ever changing terrain below suddenly flattened, turning into an endlessness of threads. All features of the sky vanished, replaced by complete blackness. There was no sun, no Moons or stars, just nothing.

What the heck am I casting?! Dallion shouted, flying back as he held onto Dallion and Adzorg.

Same as before, the beams of magic bent to let him pass, repulsed by his presence.

Nothing that you should cast outside of here, the echo said.

I know that much!

In the simplest terms, I'm making the vortex attack itself. The effects aren't immediate, but since the guardians and the vortex are one and the same, it's bound to

Look out! Diroh shouted.

Ignoring the damage dealt to him by the beams, the weaker twin had thrust for Dallion, aiming for the kill. Immediately, the otherworld burst into instances, but he knew that it was too late. Even if he managed to make two hundred, they'd be clustered close enough for the outcome to be the same.

For a fraction of a second his life flashed before his eyes. He saw his path all the way from the simple days on Earth to his arrival in Dherma village, through all the challenges that had brought him here: his relationship with Euryale, the fights against the Star, the hunts in the wilderness, gaining his familiars, losing Gleam, even the talks with the Moons. It was a long road spanning hundreds of years with its ups and downs. Now, it seemed to be over. Even if he stopped the spell he was casting, he wouldn't be able to cast a protective spell of any significance. In slow motion, he could see the water of his harpsisword increase in an attempt to create a protective barrier. Even the

armadil shield emerged a few feet away on its own accord. Sadly, neither of the two had the power to save him from his fate.

That sucks, Dallion thought. At least it was a good run.

The only thing he could do the thing he should do was try and complete the third spell. Even if he were to die, if he succeeded in killing the vortex twins, the rest of his group would get to escape.

Magic symbols suddenly emerged all over Dirohs body. There were hundreds of them, composing a spell that Academy mages would have issues with.

Before Dallions very eyes, the fury lost substance, shifting into the slime form of a copyette. Teleporting between him and the guardian, the copyette took in the blade. Tendrils shot out, wrapping themselves around the twins hand and body.

You owe me one, a voice that Dallion didnt hear before said.

TERMINAL WOUND

FIONs health has been reduced by 100%

FION has been absorbed by AGENELIN MURSER

Red and purple rectangles emerged, marking the death of the creature.

At that precise moment, the harpsisword moved on its own, striking the entangled guardian in the neck. Harp has seen her chance and took it without hesitation.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 50%

FATAL STRIKE

Damage dealt has been increased by 500%

Magic flowed through the weapon, entering Dallions arm. The experience was brief and painful, as if he had grabbed hold of a bolt of lightning. Instinct made him try to let go, but his fingers wouldnt obey, retaining their grip.

PARTIAL ABSORPTION

You have absorbed AGENELIN MURSER

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 59

The sky of Dallions realm turned purple. Abilities that required decades to develop kicked in. In one single instant, he was able to see the instructions on threads that had been unreadable. A few spots remained unclear, but he understood how the threads of the vortex were keeping it whole, as well as the instructions Adzorg was injecting to make it turn on itself. But that was not all. The new level of his magic trait had given him a sudden new perspective of magic and reality and shown him how wrong hed been about one major thing.

Chapter 784: Realms like Bubbles

Bubbles, Dallion said to himself. Its all bubbles.

The sudden boost had allowed him to finally see the outlines of the vortex, but not only that; he was able to see beyond into the world itself. The points of contact, which had been impossible to locate without a spell back during his novice days, now appeared as areas where layers of semi-transparent threads covered each other. Most important of all, right here, right now, he could see the layers of the world and they were dangerously thin. The sky was not black, at least not entirely. Looking closer, there was a thin layer of glistening purple, like the plastic foil of a package. A giant hole punctured that layer, one that both vortexes attempted to cover, stopping the endless pool of void trying to leak through.

As horrifying as this was, it didn't end there. The layer was also thinned on the opposite side of the layer. While significantly thicker, Dallion was able to look beneath the infinity of threads that composed the ground. Standing there, staring up with eagerness and anticipation, were the heads of colossi, as large as the one Dallion fought, even more. Imprisoned in their realm, they knew they had no way out, but were still there, looking at the world they once inhabited.

This is what it means, Dallion said, trying to wrap his mind around it. A spot where reality is breached.

The notion that everything he had ever known, the place he had inhabited, was nothing more than a giant bubble, made everything else seem so irrelevant. The squabbles between nobles, the chaos the Academy was recovering from, the ongoing war, even the Stars monkeyshines seemed so trivial. All the settlements, all the cities and everything within them were nothing but bubbles within a container. The chaos he thought was the wilderness was in effect nothing more than a very small part of the external chaos that had leaked in.

Get to your senses, dear boy! Adzorg shouted simultaneously in and out of Dallion's realm.

The yell was sharp enough to bring him back to reality. The wonders and horrors of the cosmos vanished, giving way to the here and now.

What little remained of the aether wasps was being devoured by the vortex in an attempt to keep its integrity. Meanwhile, the second twin was finishing off the last of the chainlings.

Faced with one enemy, the black creature attempted to merge again, but was slashed several times in the process. Ultimately, the resulting entity was no more than three times the guardian's size.

Di? Dallion asked instinctively, bursting into instances.

Not now! Adzorg said as a new set of magic instructions appeared before the otherworlder. Focus on the fight.

The new spell was specifically aimed at severing magic threads, an ideal weapon against a vortex guardian. It also presented a danger to everything else.

Lux, Gem, get back in, Dallion ordered.

The aetherfish popped out of existence. The firebird followed moments later, its blue flames surrendering Dallion to the gravity of the realm once more. Without even thinking, Dallion cast a new flight spell with a wave of his aura sword.

Ruby, he started splitting into instances. You

The shardfly wasn't where he expected it to be. Its last orders were to flutter close to Diroh and protect her. That was no longer the case. To Dallion's relief, the creature had survived the twins' final attack. To his surprise, though, it was no longer in the nearby area, flying all the way down to the ground of the vortex instead.

Double the size he remembered it, and with wings glowing bright purple, the creature was making its way to the thinned area of the reality layer. Recent events had quite possibly allowed it to absorb a bit of magic as well.

Dallion was just about to ask what it was thinking when he saw the explanation. Beneath the reality of the world, in one spot of the thinned layer, Gleam was watching. Her four sets of wings gently moved as if waiting.

How easy it would be to release her here and now. All that Dallion had to do was fly down and open a portal to the banished realm. Alas, that was the one thing he couldn't do. Creating an opening, even a small one, would provide the excuse the colossi needed to emerge in the real world. All Moon laws would have been kept since it was Dallion creating the opening. And even if the creatures would eventually be destroyed and returned back to their realm, the chaos they would deal at a time when the world was already at war outweighed the benefits of having Gleam back.

Soon,

Dallion thought. *I promise.*

In the distance, tendrils of void shot out from the chainling, engulfing the only remaining vortex guardian. Left to desperation, the creature gambled that it had enough strength to consume the twin, and it proved wrong. Rays of purple light shot out of the black silhouette like spears reaching out to endlessness.

Oh dear, Adzorg said, floating strategically behind Dallion. It's all you now, dear boy.

Of course it is, Dallion said, and for once he didn't mean it in a sarcastic way.

The mage excelled at strategy after all, not quick combat. He had already provided all the spells he could within the available time frame. Now it was time for Dallion to make use of them.

Waving his aura sword, Dallion cast five spells, increasing his basic traits as much as possible. Even so, he remained a few points short of the guardians in a few cases. Ninety was a tough number to reach. However, when magic was concerned, there was more than traits and skills.

Finding itself with a single enemy left, the guardian flew straight towards Dallion, aether swords surrounding him like a ring. Clearly, like his twin, the being had been a fighter, not a mage before exaltation. Spells were capable of many things, but not changing one's habits. There was no denying that the twins could cast spells, they just preferred close combat just like Dallion.

Let's try something new. Dallion waved his aura sword again.

Two new arms made of aether emerged from his shoulders. One of them summoned the thread splitter dagger. The other an ingot of sky silver, then drew a speed symbol on it, propelling it at his enemy like a bullet. A split second later, Dallion forced reality.

CRITICAL HIT

Damage dealt has been increased by 200%

A red rectangle emerged on the left side of the twins check. All of his remaining instances were gone, rendering him unable to avoid the injury. Even so, it didnt last long.

Good, the guardian said, his voice identical to that of the twin Dallion had fought. Absorbing half has given you an edge. There was a flash of purple light within the hole, after which the wound was gone. Or has it?

I absorbed one, I can absorb another, Dallion added fear into his words. The strands of music bounced off without effect.

Even if you do, it doesnt matter. The holes are sealed. The void was kept at bay.

Thats why you became an exalted, wasnt it? Not because of your brother, but to keep the void at bay.

The Order knows best. The guardian charged forward.

Dallion thrust his harpsisword forward, launching a point music attack. Focused strands shot at the twin. Sadly, the only thing they hit was another cluster of music strands which, while not as powerful, managed to render them harmless at the point of impact.

Guardians learn from what theyve seen. Adzorgs echo grumbled within Dallions realm. Have you forgotten everything Ive taught you?

No, Dallion performed a line attack with his aura sword at the ground below. Equipped with Adzorgs last spell, the line hit the field of threads, ripping them up.

Red rectangle appeared around the guardian, as did wounds. The armor that was so solid and self-repairing reacted like cheap cloth tearing up in places.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health had been decreased by 20%

The swords surrounding the guardian had flown at him. One had even landed a hit. Immediately, Dallion cast a healing spell with his free aether arm. It was more out of habit than anything else. Even Lux had only managed to restore his health to eighty percent before returning to his personal realm. This hit had brought him down almost to half.

Just like the good old days, Dallion thought.

That was the sign of fighting an opponent that was equally matched: he couldnt afford to be careless. The next attack would determine the winner. Either Dallion managed to absorb his adversary or he would be, in turn, absorbed.

The threads of the vortex stitched themselves together by reducing its size. Simultaneously, the wounds on the guardian vanished.

Casting the destructive spell on his thread splitter, Dallion attacked with three of his arms, while the fourth summoned the armadil shield. For a split second, he considered summoning the bladebow instead, but didnt want to risk Luxs life.

Blows and slashes were exchanged. A hundred and fifty instances to ten clashed in the air. One would have thought that Dallion would have an absolute advantage, but even with force splitting, his enemy always managed to block, evade, or parry any attacks, while making life difficult for Dallion. The only positive was that he hadn't deemed Adzorg worth going after.

Water, spark, and magic swirled around, trying to break through the guardian's shell. Occasionally, chips would fall off, only to be restored moments later. As for Dallion, over a hundred instances, on average, received serious wounds, in many cases fatal.

Adzorg, get Ruby, Dallion shouted.

There'd hardly be much use in

Get him and keep him safe!

Despite what the creature wanted, there was no saving Gleam yet.

Casting an intricate teleport spell, the old man vanished, appearing all the way next to the shardfly.

I wouldn't have gone after him, the guardian said, still attacking. Wasn't worth it.

So overconfident. Dallion saw himself in the remaining twin. No doubt, he had been a prodigy back when he had been exalted. Quite possibly, he had never known defeat or even loss. Beneath the purple surface, Dallion could see all of his emotions: determination, calm, eagerness, and a deep sense of accomplishment. In the being's view, the main task was done, and now he was just mopping things up. There wasn't even a speck of sadness regarding the death of his twin.

Those we leave behind,

Dallion thought as he drew a series of speed symbols on the armadil shield.

Catching the idea, the shield expanded, doubling in size, then slammed into the guardian. The damage was nonexistent, but it provided a second for Dallion to cast a pearl spell with his aura sword.

A new set of aether blades appeared as the guardian effortlessly shoved the shield off. As Dallion suspected, Vihrogon had enough strength to withstand an impact. More importantly, the twin didn't intend to debase himself by killing off lesser targets, not until he'd dealt with his main opponent.

Have fun, Dallion whispered and threw the pearl straight down. The new devouring spell made it considerably more efficient, ripping a hole in the ground.

CRITICAL HIT

Damage dealt has been increased by 200%

An identical wound appeared on the twin.

With absolute calm, Dallion thrust the thread splitter into the wound.

To his surprise, nothing happened. The vortex had already adapted to the last spell, rendering it useless.

Time to shine, Dallion thought, as he struck with his free hand. In the process, his Nox dagger emerged.

The pain of the crackling echoed throughout Dallions realm as the blade pierced layers of solid aether. It was a claw wrenching experience, but just as much pain as the familiar received, he also inflicted.

FATAL STRIKE

Damage dealt has been increased by 500%

SHOCK EFFECT

Your movement has been reduced by 10% for two minutes

Attack effectiveness reduced by 50% for two minutes

The vortex guardian froze. He had well over a quarter of life remaining, but it no longer mattered. Dallions aim wasn't the damage, it was that single moment of complete vulnerability.

Sorry, he whispered as he plunged the harpsisword into the open wound.

VORTEX ABSORPTION

Your MAGIC TRAIT is now 83

All the magic of the vortex rushed into Dallion. Everything became purple and then black.

Chapter 785: Adzorg's Story

The darkness felt different. Rather, it wasnt darkness, but a sense of absence. There were no magic threads, no void, no anything and within this entire endlessness of nothing stood Dallion.

Im dreaming? He wondered.

It wouldnt be the first time, especially after something so traumatic. He could still feel the vast amount of magic threads he had absorbed circulating through his body, adjusting it as they tried to settle down evenly within him.

Im not dreaming, he thought.

Absorbing the vortex hadnt knocked him out; it had supercharged him to the point that everything, even his perception, was several times higher than it was supposed to be. All this was a moment in timefractions of a second, required for his body to readjust. During that moment, though, he was almost a moon. His perception and reaction speed were so high that they were faster than the speed of light, making it seem as if he were in complete darkness. In reality, he was at the exact spot at which he had defeated the second vortex twin.

Nil? he tried to enter his realm.

Even that proved impossible. The amount of time had to be so minuscule that even venturing within a realmwhich normally took no time at allwas considered too much. If the old mage were able to speak, hed probably have provided an explanation; something vague and philosophical that made just enough sense. Maybe it had to do with speed, after all? Venturing into the realm wasnt exactly instantaneous, it still required a conscious mental effortthe thought that started the process. Right now, was he too fast even for that?

Dallions hands slowly gained form. He could see them, all four of them, holding the weapons he had used to defeat the twin. Remaining completely still, they build up, slowly spreading to the rest of his body.

Light, he thought. His hands were the closest things he could see, so the light reflected off them would reach his eyes faster. The logic was fascinating with its illogicality. With Dallion returning to normal, light was finally starting to move again.

Im just like a galaxy. He laughed mentally.

More of his surroundings he saw, the more the speed of light accelerated. The armadil shield was visible, remaining still in the air about a hundred feet away.

Adzorg was the next to appear within view, a few thousand of feet away. He had cast a protective spell around Ruby. The simplicity of the spell was a bit unlike him, but given the urgency, understandable.

What now, old man? Dallion thought. Weve got rid of the vortex gleam, so the city should return to normal. What about the damage, though?

Soon enoughor within a moment in the real worldDallion was going to find out. Then, a more serious talk would continue. There were several questions that had to be answered about Adzorg, the device, even Diroh, who had transformed into a copyette. Adzorg had made a Moon vow, so there was no

MEMORY FRAGMENT

The Fallen South, 85 years ago

Hurry up! Mage Eliac hissed.

He was a round man, with as much common sense as restraint from partying. Adzorg didnt like him, but he had to admit that the man had skills. He was one of five people in the entire Academy that saw the benefits of sending expeditions to the fallen south, and the sole one who had the courage to go there himself. Of course, as an otherworlder he had it easy. There were no limits when it came to his development. The man had managed to raise all his awakened level way beyond the required twenty, despite decreasing his magic trait by ludicrous, in Adzorgs view, amounts.

Yes, mage, the apprentices muttered,

There were four of them in total, all of them having the misfortune of being selected by the mage as his disciples. In theory, that was supposed to be a good thing. Working alongside a senior mage guaranteed status, connections, not to mention a quick promotion to full mage, three times faster than with anyone else. Often, though, Adzorg found himself wondering if it was really worth it.

Once we reach the next tower, youll get some rest, the ruddy mage said. Unless you kill off some specimen again.

Hell! Again with the specimens?! Adzorg gritted his teeth.

Not only did he find himself in the worst place in the world, but he also had to be careful not to harm any of the local flora and fauna, as if the creatures needed protection. The place was crawling with Star spawn, not to mention that even the ordinary creatures could devour an apprentice on a good day.

Flying through the jungle, wrapped in protective aether bubbles, the group continued towards one of the three known towers in the area. Moving above the tree crowns would have been much easier, but the mage didnt want to attract the attention of the local gulls. Also, there were rumors that a dragon had made its lair in the south recently.

Sir, Rivette said. Theres a vortex.

She was said to be one of the Academy prodigies, although Adzorg found her skills vastly exaggerated. True, she was faster at casting than anyone he knew, but her spells lacked any imagination whatsoever. Everything she made shed learned from books, as she never missed an opportunity to remind people.

I know. The man didnt even look back. Ignore it.

Its a level three at least, the girl persisted.

Would you really want to pause the expedition to gain a few magic levels? The mage turned around with a sigh.

Of course not, mage, everyone replied.

It wasnt difficult to tell that they were lying. Three magic levels were considerable. An apprentice was lucky to stumble upon a level one vortex, let alone anything else.

Alright, go get your magic, Mage Eliac grumbled. Adzorg, you stay.

Just great,

the boy grumbled.

For some reason, he was always a favorite to be picked for punishment. The mage claimed it was nothing of the sort, but it was difficult to deny that he was making the boy miss opportunities the others had.

Tell me, why are you here? the mage asked. You could have remained in the Learning Hall focusing on research you do best. Unlike that lot, youre no combat prodigy, and youre definitely not a fast caster.

Apparently, you think Ill learn something from the experience, sir.

And you dont?

Magic makes void manipulation impossible. Not to mention its forbidden by the emperor and the Order of the Seven Moons. Anything relating to the Star is of questionable usage.

And the artifacts left behind?

The Academy gets hundreds of artifacts every week, sir.

Yes, but not such types of artifacts. The south doesn't just contain a keep of ancient ruins. The whole world is scattered with those. This is the only place that you could find artifacts from another world. He paused. From my world. Everything that trickles to the Academy has come from here one way or another.

And why should that interest me, sir?

Because it's what you're good at. All of my students are prodigies and geniuses in their own right. You're no exception. The large man floated to Adzorg and placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. The only thing you're lacking is inspiration.

That was the most peculiar thing to say. Adzorg felt he lacked many things: awakening levels, magic levels, access to the archmages library where the actually good tomes of spellcraft and magic theory were kept. Of everything that he needed, inspiration wasn't even in the top fifty.

If you say so, sir. The boy did his best not to sigh.

You'll see. The mage laughed. Once we find something interesting, you'll see.

They didn't find anything interesting for the rest of the day. After absorbing the vortex, the rest of the apprentices spent the day talking about it and subtly gloating they were ahead of Adzorg. Competition drove progress at the Academy, even among the apprentices of the same mage. To have someone lag behind was equivalent to being ahead. Naturally, there were all sorts of rules that forbade open sabotage outside of magic duels, but there still were ways to mess with others, especially if they weren't careful.

The following day, after being attacked by a giant fish that emerged from the ground itself, the mage decided to make a pause to examine the creature. It quickly became obvious that other than the local creature's size and ferocity, they had precious little magic.

After a thoroughly disappointing three hours, the giant fish was returned to its underground lake, and the mage led on through the jungle. It was then that they finally arrived at one of the fallen towers.

In terms of architecture, Adzorg didn't find it particularly impressive. With the exception of the height, he had seen better at the Academy. The real value of the towers, as Eliac kept on repeating, were the treasures held inside.

Cast your protection spells. The mage turned to his disciples. There might be a few creatures on the inside.

Spells were drawn in the air, surrounding Adzorg and the rest with several protective spheres. A few even added some aether swords or thorn rings in an effort to show themselves fancy. Interestingly enough, the mage did nothing of the sort.

Don't you need protective spells, sir? Adzorg asked.

I'll be fine. Thanks for asking. The man cast an advanced flight spell. Now, slowly, follow me. He rose up on the outside of the tower. At no point was he more than half a foot away from the dark gray surface of the structure, and yet not once did he try to enter.

Suddenly, as they were ascending, a multitude of black tentacles poured out of all the windows of the floor, thrusting in the direction of the mage.

Look out! Adzorg shouted. His hands quickly cast an attack spell as fast as he could.

Barely had he gotten halfway there when two of his fellow apprentices completed their spells, launching means and aether projectiles at the void matter.

Huge chunks of black were torn off. Losing structural integrity, then fell down to the ground in the form of large blobs of liquid.

The mage, on the other hand, didnt move a muscle. It was almost as if he was welcoming that action. The moment a tentacle came in contact with him, it became clear why. A bright mess of purple flashed around him, setting the tentacles on fire.

This is where we go in, he said, as the void retreated into the building. Remember, be on guard and stay behind me.

Why not just scorch them out of there? Adzorg asked.

Without a reply, the large mage floated in. The apprentices looked at each other. No one was willing to be the first to follow their mentor, just as no one wanted to be the last. A few blood freezing screams later, Adzorg decided to take the initiative.

Casting a spell to increase the opening of the window, they stepped into a narrow corridor. The smell of burned bones and fur hit his nostrils like a brick. Eyes tearing up, the apprentice quickly cast a smell negating spell.

What do you see? one of the other apprentices whispered a safe distance behind him.

Nothing, Adzorg whispered back.

That wasnt exactly true. While there was no trace of the mage or any Star spawn creatures, thankfully, there were quite a few things to be seen. Most notable were the large circular holes in the wall. Judging by the faint remnants of magic, it was safe to assume that they were made by Eliac.

Hes further inside, Adzorg said over his shoulder.

To his surprise, none of the other three joined him in the building, still floating on the outside. At that moment, he got a sudden realization. This was finally his moment to shine. Even if he didnt tell anyone about the others cowardice, the motion would remain buried deep in their minds.

With a confident smirk, he floated on.

Room after room, he moved on, always on guard. If there was any furniture or decorations, the void tentacles or the mage must have utterly destroyed them. Each room was as bare as a beggars cellar, only darker than the last.

All the bestiaries claimed that it was a bad idea to cast light spells when in the presence of dangerous creatures, but Adzorgs curiosity got the better of him. Holding his breath, he cast a quick spell, creating a ball of white flame.

Soon enough, he finally glimpsed the back of his mentor.

Mage, he whispered, slowing down slowly as he approached.

There was no response.

Mage Eliac, he repeated, slightly louder.

Theres no need to whisper, kid, the mage said. Its only the two of us.

What are you looking at? Adzorg thought. Curiosity urged him to approach, but caution kept him ten feet away. Finally, curiosity won.

Fingers at the ready, Adzorg moved through the final hole in the wall, joining the mages side. Thats when he saw it: an artifact so different from everything he had seen before that he knew it couldnt come from this world.

Beautiful, isnt it? Eliac asked. Never thought Id see one of those again.

What is it? The object resembled a medium-sized cube of some sort of metal with a class circle on one side.

Something thats not supposed to exist here.

Chapter 786: Adzorg's Story - Apprenticeship

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Mage Academy Learning Hall, 83 years ago

There was an inexplicable fascination that came with otherworldly items. They were far better crafted than anything Adzorg had ever seen, even compared to artifacts from previous ages of the world. The materials were foreign, as was the function, and above all there was a deep aura of confidence that emanated from them, as if the items were looking down on their current surroundings.

Of course, there were some oddities as well. Human world items never had guardians. What was more, unlike other hollow artifacts, they appeared to be incapable of obtaining such. Adzorg had made dozens of attempts and all of them ended in utter failure.

Are you still messing with the junk? Eliac entered the large room.

In theory, this was supposed to be his lab, but he had given it to his apprentices. Initially, the four had divided it into areas of dominance, but as their interests diverged, many of them focused on different things. The most prolific had expressed a desire to join the battle mages, leaving half a year after the groups expedition to the south. Another had become a full mage one year later. At present, only Adzorg and Rivette shared the space, although the girl spent more time in one library or another.

Its not junk, Adzorg said without even looking back.

Its complete junk, the man grumbled. I should know.

The way he walked made it more than clear that something was on his mind.

The discussions with the archmage went poorly? Adzorg asked.

Nope. Eliac summoned an obscenely large cushioned chair, then relaxed into it. That windbag didnt bother to show up.

Hes very dedicated to doing nothing.

The mage snorted.

Its not healthy to be so cynical at such a young age. The smile quickly faded away. The emperor called me, he said. He doesnt think it would be a good idea if I were to become the next archmage.

What? Adzorg turned around, forgetting the allure of the otherworldly items for a moment. Why? Youve the most capable mage the Academy has. The most capable one actually wanting the position, that was.

Apparently not. The emperor is of the view that putting an otherworlder in charge might not be the best strategy in the current situation Whatever that means.

Adzorg stood there, as if hit by lightning. Spending part of his childhood and all his adult life at the Academy, he was familiar with the particular blend of political betrayal and backstabbery. Still, he didnt imagine it could come from the emperor himself. The current Emperor Tamin was the strongest awakened there was, and a direct descendant of the first ruler who had established the empire. He rarely meddled in the affairs of the Academy. As far as everyone was aware, he showed remarkably little interest, despite being a mage himself.

If you ask me, its because of those. He glanced at the items. The Order doesnt like them, and with tensions starting in the west, the emperor has to play nice. He leaned back, closing his eyes. It was just a matter of time, I guess. Showing too much interest in the technology of the Star wasnt the best idea.

But If they knew what this could accomplish

Oh, they know, Eliac interrupted. They know very well. Thats why they want me to stop. And thats why you should stop as well.

Me? Adzorg felt as if hed been hit in the stomach.

For the moment they are focusing on me. If you continue to show interest, their attacks will affect you as well. Why do you think all of the others rushed to get away from me as quickly as possible?

They just wanted to become a mage faster.

And you dont? Eliac laughed.

There was no denying it. Every apprentice wanted to become a mage, even more than a novice wanted to become an apprentice. Adzorg knew he had the skills to avoid the pit trap of mediocrity, though he also had to admit that his recent interests had rendered him less significant in the eyes of the Academy. If he had stuck to writing boring theories of questionable significance, yet in a very verbose fashionlike one of his fellow apprentices hadthere was every chance he would have advanced by now.

Rivette has already been approved, the mage added. Theyre delaying the announcement until the emperor has decided what to do with me.

Werent you punished already?

No. That was just to make it clear that I would be. The real punishment will come soon enough, youll see. I suggest you use that time to focus on something he opened an eye, glancing in the

direction of the items that isn't that. Theory, realm transformation, vortex research, he waved a hand. Any will do.

The warning was clear. Adzorg didn't particularly like being told what to do, but at the same time he was smart enough to know what would happen if he didn't. The very next day he left Eliac's lab to focus on realm modification at the Academy's research cloister.

Several months later, as the otherworldly mage had predicted, the punishment was announced. By decree of the emperor, all mages from other worlds were to leave the Academy, focusing on threads on the empire's borders. There wasn't a soul alive that didn't see that for what it was—banishment—but they knew better than to defy the absolute ruler of the land.

Within weeks, around fifty mages left, likely never to be seen again; Eliac was among them. Coincidentally, or not so much, the same day Rivette was made a full mage, leaving the Learning Hall for her own laboratory which was generously provided by the archmage himself.

Also, rather coincidentally, the archmage stepped down from his position a week later, taking on the role of imperial court mage. The title was entirely ceremonious, but ensured a comfortable life. Thus, discussions regarding a new archmage quickly began.

Who do you think it'll be? one of Adzorg's fellow apprentices asked.

The boy was half his age, and perfectly aware that he'd remain at his current rank for the rest of his life. It wasn't that he was incompetent per se, but his magic trait had reached its limit, blocking his development in the only area that mattered. Thus, he had been buried in one of the least notable areas of research—realm modification.

What does it matter? Adzorg grumbled.

His personal research was progressing remarkably well. When he initially requested to change fields, many thought it was as punishment for his mentor. That couldn't be further from the truth. While realm modification held little significance for mages, Adzorg could clearly see how sought it would be outside of the Academy. Prison items were a perfect means for nobles to punish friends and enemies and see instant results. In addition, any item that could help train awakened, especially in times of war, would be highly sought after. If the archmage or any of the senior mages were forward-thinking, they would have realized this and forbidden Adzorg from doing his research unsupervised. By his estimates, in less than a decade, when the internal squabbles had ended, they would realize their mistake, but by then it would be too late; he'd already be an established expert.

Well, yeah, his friend replied. If it's the right person, the Academy could

There's no right person. Whoever it is, they won't be sympathetic towards us. Besides, none of the competent ones want to get involved.

Come on. You must at least be curious. There's talk that Grand Mage Whidico might have a go. As an active battle mage

She has no chance. The emperor wouldn't allow it. More than likely, no one will. If you're asking my thoughts about the betting pool, put your money on the most boring person there is. Adzorg paused for a few minutes. Also the youngest.

Why the youngest?

Appearances. Changing old blood with new and all that. The last archmage held on for five decades. The next one will be someone who could keep an eye on this place for just as long. Though changed in a few years, he added to himself.

You're sure about this?

Without a doubt.

Pleased, the apprentice rushed off to place his bet, leaving Adzorg to continue with his work. His latest theory, if proven correct, had the possibility of creating a virtually inescapable prison item with uneven time dilation properties. However, even while thinking about it, his mind was focused on the otherworldly items. Before abruptly stopping his research on those, he had managed to see indirect proof of threads that weren't magic or even from this world. If that proved correct, there could be a way to follow them all the way to their world of origin. The possibility had been mentioned in a few ancient scrolls Adzorg had access to, but dismissed as improbable. Yet, if it wasn't, he could make the greatest discovery the Academy and even the world had ever known.

The archmage selection was brief and unsurprising. The new person to take on the post was competent, though unremarkable, and not part of any major faction. Naturally, he also received the backing from the Imperial House, quickly ending even rumors of disagreement among mages. From there on, things proceeded as normal.

Within a few years, Adzorg's efforts were noticed to the point that he was even considered for becoming a mage. The only obstacle was his low magic trait, though steps were made to remedy that. Between arranged duels, artifact gifts from nobles willing to acquire some of his works, and the occasional wild vortex, he had managed to raise his magic level to the forties. At that point, the most unexpected thing happened.

One day, with little warning, it was announced that the emperor himself would visit the Academy. This was a rare occasion, making everyone of importance scramble to bring their respecting areas into shape. Unfortunately, for them, the emperor did not visit the archmages domain or any of the other prominent building clusters. Instead, the first and only place he went to was the Learning Hall, or rather a very specific part of it.

Add some runes, an academy mage hissed at the apprentices.

Adzorg didn't see the point. Being a mage, the emperor would be easily able to see beyond any simple illusion an apprentice could muster. Still, he did as was asked, then straightened up, expecting the visit. Truth be told, part of him was looking forward to it. Seeing the emperor in person was always a big deal, especially up close.

Here, someone whispered.

The mages in the room turned pale, then rushed to the only door, ready to welcome their ruler. Normally, one of the emperor's guards was supposed to enter and make sure everything was in order. When the door opened, everyone's heart skipped a beat as the seven-foot figure of Emperor Tamin stepped in.

Moons Adzorg thought.

If there was someone who could claim to be beyond awakening, this one was it. Every item and piece of clothing worn by the man contained so much magic that it glowed brighter than a purple flame. Yet, compared to the body of the emperor himself, they were like candles to the sun. The light coming from the mans face was so intense that Adzorg was forced to wince. No wonder that he always wore a mask when addressing the public.

A quick gesture towards the mages stopped them from making a sound just as they were about to welcome him. Several seconds later, the ruler was joined by the archmage and the rest of the small procession.

This is your item research? he asked in a voice heavy with power.

Yes, Emperor, the archmage quickly replied. One of the lesser research areas, he added as an excuse.

The emperor walked in, examining the space. It was impossible to say to what degree he was disappointed.

Youre one of Eliacs, arent you? The rulers head turned in Adzorgs direction.

Yes, Emperor. Adzorg instinctively bowed down.

A shame what happened to him, he said almost dismissively. At least he was very good at finding talent. I hear youre a prodigy when it comes to item realm modifications.

Yes, Emperor. Modesty wasnt a quality that awakened respected.

Show me.

Adzorg felt as if he were struck by lightning. In his mind, he had often imagined wowing his superiors with one of his creations. However, presenting something to the emperor was different. There was no way that a training item would be remotely impressive. The only thing that would approach a masterpiece would be something he didnt dare bring anywhere near a noble of such stature.

Apprentice, the archmage said in a sharp tone. Do you have anything to show to the emperor?

This was it. It was now or never. Adzorg knew hed never get another opportunity such as this, so decided to risk it.

I constructed a prison item, he said. One that could keep someone inside for as long as one of the ancient artifacts. Maybe longer.

Even with the emperor present, a few whispers escaped his entourage.

Are you suggesting the archmage began, but a quick flick of the hand on the part of the emperor made him stop.

Bring it, the emperor ordered.

His pulse doubling, Adzorg went to his personal cabinet from where he took a small crystal sphere. Holding it with his own hands already caused some commotion. Usually, prison items were handled with gloves to make sure they wouldnt affect the person wanting to use them.

I've integrated a few spells to protect the owner from getting affected, and can easily make anyone's magic threads to be exempt of

Before he could finish, the emperor cast a spell, causing the sphere to fly out of Adzorg's hands and into his grip. Everyone froze. The mere thought of having the emperor locked in a prison item was equivalent to rebellion. Even if Adzorg were to rush and release him, years, probably decades, would have passed.

Rather impressive, the emperor said, tossing the sphere back to Adzorg. Elegant, self-sustaining defenses, with the ability to be produced. I want a few dozen of these toys.

Adzorg blinked.

Yes, Emperor, he said with a slight delay.

You'll be in charge of making them. The archmage will provide enough resources and apprentices to have it done quickly.

Emperor, I'm not a mage, Adzorg almost stuttered. I can't

You are now, the emperor declared. Don't let me down.

Chapter 787: Adzorg's Story - Advancement

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Mage Academy Learning Hall, 72 years ago

Being head of the Learning Hall wasn't at all as fun as it was supposed to be. It was claimed to be a power position within the Academy with countless benefits. Nobles tended to send gifts to make sure their children did well, mages tended to offer favors for having their pick of skilled apprentices, not to mention that the students and tutors were eager to impress Adzorg to be noticed. In truth, the job took a lot of time from his research, swamping him with needless bureaucracy and boredom.

Five years had been enough to have him witness pretty much everything that there was to see. The bribes, the brown-nosing attempts, even the intrigues had turned to just more of the same. As for his research, his true research, it had to continue to be done in secret.

There was a knock on the door.

Yes, Adzorg said in a bored tone.

It was normal for mages from the administration to pop up several times per day requesting permission or clarification. Even after providing them with echo items, the sniveling little bureaucrats continued to want to hear his orders in person. The really sad part was that many of them were twice his age.

What is it this he looked up, then instantly froze.

The visitor wasn't some low-level mage, but the emperor himself. This was the second time Adzorg had seen him, and it was just as shocking as the first.

Emperor. He stood up. I wasn't informed that

Informed? The emperor asked, making it clear he was the ruler of the largest country in the known world.

Expecting, Adzorg quickly corrected himself. Your visits are usually accompanied by a rush to improve the spot you'd be visiting.

Yes, aren't they? The man might have smiled, but the incandescent glow of purple made it impossible to tell. How do you like your new position? he asked.

I'm thankful that you've entrusted me with the Learning Hall, Emperor. Adzorg gave the only possible correct answer.

Good, because I have another task for you.

On cue, another person entered the room. He was young, not even reached his teenage years, yet the magic within him was impressive. His clothes and posture made it clear he didn't belong to a noble family, let alone the imperial house, posing questions about where the emperor had found him.

After some thought, I believe the advice I was given a decade ago to have been false, the emperor continued. Of course, since the old archmage was chosen by my father, I trusted his judgment on the matter completely. Since his passing, however, it's become clear that otherworlders do not present the threat he claimed.

Passing? Adzorg hadn't heard anything of the sort. It was true that the imperial house guarded its secrets, but something as significant as the death of a former archmage should have become known, at least at the Academy.

For that reason, I'll be changing the policy regarding otherworlders at the Academy.

Adzorg's glance shifted from the emperor to the boy.

I see you've guessed it. The emperor put his hand on the boy's shoulder. Based on the old rules, he'd have been cast out to the borders of the empire of beyond, most likely to become part of a monastery of the Order.

That much was true. The Order of the Seven Moons was extremely good at that. They gladly opened their doors to everyone, but especially mages that had fallen out of favor one way or another.

I want you to train him.

Emperor? Adzorg didn't know what to say. It's an honor, but I don't think I'm capable of teaching. Even the Learning Hall's administration said that I should never

short-sighted opinions. The emperor waved his hand, putting an end to the discussion. No one believed that you would do well as the head of the Learning Hall, and look at it now.

As praiseworthy as that sounded, Adzorg knew perfectly well he had done close to nothing to change the practices of the learning hall. The place virtually ran itself. True, he had put an emphasis on skill rather than providence, but he wasn't the first to do so. Of course, that had changed just now. Anything the emperor said became the truth and could not be disputed.

Thank you, Emperor. Anything you would require?

The usual. Dont let me down.

The tone was warm, but the warning was apparent.

This is the first otherworlder to join the academy in ten years, but there will be more. There are always more. Your goal is to see to it that they reach their potential. Ill remove all of the bureaucratic hindrances by appointing you as the next archmage.

Chill mixed with excitement. The title was sought after by everyone. It wasnt only the power and influence that it provided, but also a discretion next to that of the emperor himself. An archmage could meddle with any project and as long as it wasnt against the emperor himself, there would be no questions asked, no explanations needed.

The only thing you need to do in order to convince me is to prove youre up to the task. The boy is recently awakened, with no concept of magic or awakening. Make him a mage within five years. Any less and Ill consider someone else for the position.

There was a momentary flash, after which the form of the emperor broke down into purple dust that slowly fell to the ground. Adzorg made note that at no point did he see the ruler cast a spell, nor had he sensed any of the magic threads doing anything they were supposed to. Without question, the greatest awakened was also the most capable mage, having access to spells that even the Academy didnt know about; and he had just offered him the top position.

How long since you came to this world? Adzorg directed his attention to the boy.

Three weeks. There was a slight shiver in his voice. Maybe a few days more.

How old were you before you appeared?

There was silence.

Dear boy, my mentor was an otherworlder from Baltimore, the mage said, slightly annoyed. He was never tight lipped about his experiences. I even know his, Adzorg paused for a moment, making sure to phrase it right, favorite sports team. So, how old were you?

Older.

Older. That might cause a few problems. Youll have to unlearn a lot. Whats your name?

Here or back home?

Here.

Eval, Alien Eval.

Alien the first otherworlder that Adzorg had seen since the banishment of his mentor, as well as his first student ever. Teaching him wasnt going to be easy, but at least he hadnt spent long in the awakened world. Building a good foundation was possible, and with a good foundation, he could achieve a lot.

The news spread quickly. Less than a day after the boys arrival, the archmage made an announcement that otherworlders were welcome back to the Academy once more. Naturally, Adzorg was given the task to teach and prepare them, being the head of the Learning Halla task that he graciously took on.

Despite the initial doubts, Alien proved to be rather competent when it came to learning. He had a good understanding of theory and tactical principles. The only problem was the age mismatch. One of every four otherworlders arrived with the condition. It gave them more knowledge, but also made them socially awkward. The boy was lucky that he had been found early and taken to the Academy, where everyone was considered strange when compared to normal people, even awakened.

It took two decades for the boy to go through everything Adzorg deemed an awakened should know; or in terms of real life just over three weeks. All days without exception were spent in various item realms that the mage had specifically set up for the task. Each was also occupied by a reverse echo, allowing him to keep a hands-on approach.

Once everything was performed to satisfaction, the magic training began. With the theoretical parts already discussed, it took just over a day for Alien to fulfill the qualifications of becoming a rank three novice. Normally, the bureaucracy would have prevented it, but since there was little secret regarding the emperor's interest in the matter, all the administrative requirements were waived.

For a moment, Adzorg was rather pleased with his achievement. If things kept going on like this, he could earn his position in one year instead of five. Then, the first major obstacle took place despite his flawless experience and understanding, the boy remained at level one, and even with the many achievements he had earned while training, no one was willing to enter a magic duel with him. The reason was as logical as it was infuriating: no one wanted to risk causing the emperor's favorite new toy to fail. Apprentices that gladly traded their magic for noble favors to boost the traits of children of influential families were terrified of something going wrong. As the saying went, planned magic duels never hurt anyone, but why risk it? Even after Alien had boosted his magic trait to seven thanks to magical artifacts and sewer vortex hunting, the situation remained the same.

Why don't you give me a few levels? the boy asked Adzorg. If no one else will.

Dear boy, I'm in my current position because I don't give away my magic just like that.

So, it's a political statement?

Yes. An archmage cannot be seen going against the emperor. But if he blindly does everything the emperor says, no one would respect him.

That's stupid.

Yes, but it doesn't change how things stand. Besides, the emperor wanted you to reach your limit. If I just hand him a toy I've constructed, I won't only lose the promised position, but there might be other consequences.

If I become archmage, I won't bother with such nonsense.

If you become archmage, you can do whatever you wish. Before that, you must become a mage, and the way you are now, I can't risk you using training vortexes.

The boy winced. You want me to keep roaming the sewers?

That won't help either. You've already cleaned all the magic there. It'll take years before new vortexes form.

So, what do you want me to do? Learn more spells? I've already reached my level cap.

That, dear boy, is precisely the core of the problem. Without increasing your cap, theres nothing you can do. However, if you were to increase the cap, youd decrease what youve gained, making you just as incapable of fighting in vortexes.

My traits arent bad. I can

Theres more to leveling up than traits. At your level, you cant even create an echo, let alone any of the important things.

How come everyone else manages? Alien crossed his arms. Ive seen children younger than me obtain magic easily. Why cant I?

Adzorg clenched his fist. Because I wont allow it! Theres a lot at stake here and I wont allow you to recklessly boost your traits without thinking of the consequences!

In the end, he had no choice but to do so. Unable to find an alternative, the boy resorted to low level magic absorption to get his magic to ten, after which he lost half of it so he could level up to the first gate at the Academys awakening altar.

It was approximately at that time that the second otherworlder mage was introduced to the Academy a girl who had the rare fortune of starting with a magic trait of six at her first level. Doubling his efforts, Adzorg dedicated more of his time to helping both of them grow.

Thanks to his dedication, Alien got to a point at which he could fight training vortexes, quickly acquiring the magic required to become an apprentice. Sadly, that was also the point at which he decided to rebel against Adzorg by secretly going to the awakening shrine and boosting his level to twenty. The result wasnt beneficial to anyone, and the irony of it all was that Adzorg would have explained that if only his apprentice would have asked.

The girl, in contrast, followed a much different approach. Ignoring the awakening leveling completely, she focused solely on magic. Unlike Alien, though, she never fought or engaged in collecting herself, instead creating entities of clouds to do it for her. Her affinity was rather remarkable, though given that she had become a favored of Galatea, quite normal.

Three and a half years later, the moment of truth finally came. Recognized as a prodigy, the girl was quickly made an apprentice, continuing her research in a completely different field. Alien followed nine months later, despite having a head start. Adzorgs disappointment, the second as far as his apprentice was concerned, was that the boy had chosen the easiest, though least prospective field, guaranteeing himself an easy title.

You could have done a lot better, dear boy, he said as Alien was packing his things. The ceremony wasnt held yet, but everyone knew that it was a foregone conclusion.

Why? This suits both of us.

Dont hold that tone with me.

It suits both of us, mage, the boy said. Ill be out of here and youve done what the emperor required. I bet that youll be getting that promotion in a few weeks.

Indeed, most likely, Adzorg would.

You could have achieved a lot more, he continued. Unlike me and most others, you have no limitations. I tried to tell you this before, but you ignored it and

What good has it done me? I lost thirty magic levels, leveling up. Then I hear there are artifacts that could have avoided that.

You can still get them, Adzorg said dismissively. Once youre a mage, you can have more than enough duels to make up for your investment. With just a bit more patience and focus, you could have taken over this place.

Is that what you wanted? there was a genuine surprise in the boys voice. To take over your position?

The Learning Hall needs an otherworlder. You have a lot more experience, no limit, and an open mind. Things come natural to you, things that take others decades to figure out.

This was the first open conversation the two had had. Each had completely misjudged the other, leading to events turning out as they were. Alien left, wanting to have nothing to do with the mage, and Adzorg finally went back to his research. There was one thing on which both of them were mistaken, however. The promotion didnt come anytime soon. It was decades later that the current archmage retired, leaving it open for Adzorg to take. By then, several more otherworlders had also joined the Academy, though they were no longer exclusively trained by him. After everything was said and done, Adzorg had done what the emperor had requested and it was now time to concentrate on his passionunravel the properties of the otherworldly items and, if possible, find a way to establish a portal between their worlds and this.

Chapter 788: Adzorg's Story - Accountability

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Mage Academy Research Cloister, 17 years ago

Is anything wrong, dear boy? the Adzorg asked. Youve been somewhat distracted lately.

Just unsure about this, Gassil replied. Star schematics not sure what to expect.

There was a time when Adzorg thought the boy to be brilliant. Unfortunately, he had turned out to be a disappointment. He had a deep-rooted sense of superiority that poisoned his outlook on the world, but that wasnt the main issue. Lots of mages suffered from an overabundance of ego. Even Adzorg had been affected latterly, following in the footsteps of his old teacher and gaining a few pounds, among other things.

Gassils main problem was that he had taken the easy path, joining Aliens Shimmering Circle.

Worried about the Order? Adzorg asked. I didnt think you were one of the faithful.

Not the Order. The thing youre making. What if something unintended creeps in?

Chainlings? They too follow rules like the rest of us. As I told you, magic is the means to create loopholes. The devices the Star created are objects, nothing more. They wont spontaneously turn evil. Its all about how one uses them.

Gassil nodded in his halfhearted fashion. It was obvious to everyone that the only reason he had been sent to Adzorgs project was to spy on him. Then again, it didnt matter. As an otherworlder, the young mage had what Adzorg requiredthe ability to see what came from Earth. It was a rare quality, and he had done his job well. All that was left was for Adzorg to finish his work.

Leaving the room, the archmage went directly to the inner sanctum.

Archmage, a sharp female voice said.

Any other time, Adzorg would have let out a sigh. In his old age, he had grown tired of interruptions, especially by guards. This person was different. She had protected his projects for the last few decades, not to mention she was the third highest leveled captain in the empire.

I don't think it's a good idea to have him around, the captain said. He'll cause problems.

What can he cause?

Why do you insist on finding out?

Why indeed? Despite everything, Adzorg felt some sort of connection to Gassil. The man was his last otherworlder pupil, before Alien had convinced the emperor to take over their training. It wasn't terribly important. After all, it allowed Adzorg to focus on his actual interests. Still, there were notes of sadness he felt even now.

Bah. The archmage waved his head. It'll be fine. If the circle could have done something, they would have intervened already. Besides, in a few minutes, it'll no longer matter.

Sometimes you can be arrogantly overconfident, sir.

What else is new? Adzorg laughed. Anything else suspicious today?

Valerian tried to get to the device alone a few times.

He's a snake, but he's skilled and obedient.

The sad truth was that most of the mages assisting Adzorg were the same. The only reason they had agreed to join the project was because they hoped it would benefit them one way or another. Among them, there wasn't a single one who believed in the work he was doing. They couldn't see the majesty of his work. At times, Adzorg wasn't even sure anyone did.

It no longer matters. The archmage shook his head and continued forward. This time, he was followed by the captain in her set of full armor.

The design appeared to be like that of any imperial legionary, but it had been specially modified by him so as not to interfere with the device. A few moments later, the two were at a massive wooden door. Nothing but bolts held it shut. Right now, they were removed, allowing the Adzorg to open it with one brisk action. Once he did, the device he had been working on for so long was before him.

Rumors abounded regarding its shape and appearance. Many in the Academy believed it was as large as the building itself. The truth was that it was barely ten feet in size, containing thousands of gears, segments, and magic crystals, each made from enough rare metals to rival the emperor's home. A huge clock kept on ticking, though it never showed the time. Adzorg had found that time dilation was one of the factors needed to make the portal possible.

A thin line of chalk surrounded the device, indicating how far anyone could approach. Of course, that didn't apply to Adzorg. Crossing the line, he took a small marble from his pocket and put it into one of the five empty slots of the device's dial. The space beneath hummed, causing the air to ripple. The smallest of portals emerged, barely enough for a child to reach into.

Pleased, the archmage placed a second pearl. The portal doubled in size.

Are you sure you want to do it alone? The captain asked. You'll need help if something goes wrong. Nothing will go wrong. Adzorg placed a third piece. Alien doesn't have the level and Leora doesn't have the courage. None of the rest particularly matter.

A third marble was placed, then a fourth. Upon reaching the last, the archmage stopped. This was the moment of truth. Once that was in, a complete link to Earththe world of humanswould become reality. Some minor adjustments might be required, but the tunnel would be there. All the technology he had seen in the fallen south, inexplicable devices that defied explanation, people with greater knowledge that the awakened world had seen in eras would become available and their point of contact would be the empire.

This day will be remembered, Adzorg said.

No sooner had he done so than the captain drew her sword, striking for his leg. Instinct took over, causing him to instantly cast a protective spell, while the edge of the blade was fractions away.

The weapon bounced off. Displeased with her failed attempt, the captain quickly leaped back, a second sword bared in her other hand.

There was a moment of confusion. Of all the people he knew, Adzorg never believed he'd be betrayed by her. Then he noticed what he should have before: the person who had attacked him wasn't the captain he knew.

Copyette, he hissed.

Uncovered, the creature removed its illusion. The figure remained that of the captain, only now the threads within her body were glowing in a completely different light.

To think that the Order would get involved. Adzorg cast a few quick spells, covering himself with several protective layers of magic threads. Did you kill her?

You know that's not allowed, the copyette replied. Although given what you've done, I could well have.

I haven't broken any rules.

That's a matter of interpretation. Clearly, some think that you have and since the emperor isn't here, he's decided not to interfere. The copyette took a step forward. She's in this very room. I took advantage of the flaw you placed within her.

I did no such thing.

Of course you did, the other laughed. You showed her kindness when she needed it, creating a bond of loyalty. She saw through me, but even so, fighting someone in your appearance added a grain of doubt that slowed her actions just enough for me to take advantage.

Adzorg looked at the device. All he needed was to place the last marble for it to function. The copyette must have thought the same, for he cast a protective barrier around the device.

If you came to destroy the timepiece, you could have done so while I was gone.

I never wanted anything, the copyette replied. My orders were to deal with your first and only then destroy the device.

Oh?

Apparently, youve considered the hand that can operate it. If I destroy it, youll just build another and that time I might not be as lucky.

Touching of your masters to say so.

The entire space of the room warped. There was a certain degree of risk using potent spells while the device was active. Facing a copyette was bad enough as it was. Adzorg had heard the rumors like everyone else. Unlike them, though, he was in a position in which he knew they were more than rumors. Indeed, there were copyettes in the open, only they werent beings that had escaped their banishment. Rather, they had been released and leashed to do the bidding of their masters in the Order. Not in a thousand years did he think that any of them would have the courage to send one into the heart of the Academy.

Space twisted, causing the protective barrier around the device to shatter. Unwilling to give Adzorg the advantage, the copyette charged forward with both strikes and spells combined.

Too late, the archmage thought.

The spell he had cast continued with its full effect, grabbing the copyette mid air as if with invisible strands. Flesh changed to slime as the creature made a futile attempt to break free.

No, Adzorg said, causing the entity to splat into nothingness.

Quickly, the archmage began his counter spell. The fight had lasted less than a minute, but for everyone else, it had stretched for way longer. The magic had affected the flow of time in the devices immediate vicinity. There was no telling how much exactly had passed; and magic leaking through a portal between worlds was never a good idea.

The sound of a loud crack filled the room. To Adzorgs horror, he was too late.

* * *

Silence. Calm. Serenity. All those were notions that Adzorg hadnt experienced in so long that hed forgotten they existed. It was nice experiencing them, yet at the same time, they told him that something wasnt right.

You really outdid yourself, my friend, a powerful voice said, causing the archmage to open his eyes.

The room he was in remained unfamiliar, but he could easily tell by the style and furniture that it was somewhere within the Imperial Palace.

I almost thought Id lost you. The tall figure of the emperor approached.

What am I doing here? Adzorg tried to move, but quickly found out that a mesh of air currents was keeping him down. Only his eyes were free to move about, quickly revealing the four crimson furies that stood at the ready.

If Im to believe Alien half the cloister was destroyed by your little experiment, the emperor continued. Of course, he always had the tendency to exaggerate.

Naturally

Nonetheless, Im confused what went so catastrophically wrong. Im aware of the Academys little internal games, but nothing should have caused this. Having a triple tower vortex in my domain was definitely a first.

The Order, Adzorg managed to say. They sabotaged it.

They did? Didnt think the Archbishop had the stones. Are you sure?

There was a copyette.

I see The glowing figure of the emperor walked away, moving to a part of the room that Adzorg couldnt see. Ill have to punish you, he said. After what happened, I dont have a choice. Your research will be banned, Valerian will take your place, and youll be given to the Order, along with any other survivors, for your punishment.

It wasnt lost on Adzorg that the people responsible for the catastrophe were the ones punishing everyone else. Still, that was the way of the world. He had rolled the dice and proved not strong enough to take on the consequences.

Its likely theyll send you to Nerasol.

So close to the fallen south? Adzorg asked.

The Archbishop always lacked imagination. Hell put you as far away from the Academy as possible, likely keep an eye on you as well. However, I still have a task for you.

A task? Adzorg instinctively tried to sit up and this time the air threads let him.

I want you to rebuild your device.

Emperor?

The effects of the copyettes meddling might have destroyed whats here, but theres still a part beyond this world. I can see it floating in the void just outside the world bubble. In all likelihood, itll just remain there for all eternity, completely inert and inactive. Yet, I cannot take the risk. Do you understand?

Adzorg nodded. Leaving a sword of destruction hang over the world by a thread was dangerous. Even knowing about it could drive people to insanity. The problem had to be dealt with no matter the difficulties, no matter how long it would take.

Oh, one last thing, the emperor said. I wont be providing you any help on this task. Still, Ill make sure youre not alone on it.

Chapter 789: The Truth about Nil

The memory fragment faded away just as quickly as it had appeared. Parts of it Dallion had already seen within the memory of someone elsethe rogue mage he had fought back while pursuing the poison plague sword. That was only the tip of the iceberg, though.

During the single moment his body surged with new magical power, Dallion had done something that was supposed to be impossible: experience a memory of an archmage. Clearly, there were some sort of ties between the magic and empathy traits no one had told him about.

Part of the ground emerged, revealed by the clearing blackness. It was the same hole that had been created by the vortex. By standard logic, it wasnt supposed to be here; yet Dallion absorbing the

vortex had added a few traces of permanence to the temporary gleam. The real destruction would follow later when the real vortex emerged, but even now a few scars would be left.

Slowly, the aura sword Dallion was holding began to move. With time progressively returning to normal, so was the ability for his mind to control his body at adequate speed. The effects of the boost were coming to an end; rather, it was more appropriate to say that his body was getting used to being in sync with his brain.

Dozens of new protective spheres appeared, teleporting instantly around everything and everyone of importance to Dallion: Ruby, Adzorg, his gear instinctively, he also had one ready for Diroh, even though he knew that the fury wasnt there.

Shes still here, Gen said from Dallions domain. The echo hadnt shared his recent boost, but it was still able to know his thoughts. But confused. She doesnt remember anything regarding her original being here. All she knows is that Di is hard at work at the Academy, struggling to combine her recent novice knowledge with her innate skills.

Are you sure? Dallion asked mentally.

Ariel checked her with music, Gen replied. And when he was done, so did Harp.

That removed any doubt, but it also brought one serious question: what had caused the echo to act so irrationally. She had been rather quiet, but ultimately, backed the copyettes story. This wasnt supposed to have happened, and yet there was no denying it. Assuming that the echo fury wasnt lying, that left only one possibility: the copyette had somehow managed to manipulate her, which was more than a bit scary.

Well done, dear boy, Adzorgs echo said. Dont worry, it takes a while to get used to. Normally, people dont acquire so much in such a short amount of time. You should be alright soon enough.

Was this the only double vortex youve seen? the otherworlder asked.

Definitely not, but the numbers were nowhere as close. If someone is lucky to come upon a five within a two, its a monumental occasion. In your case, though. A nine within a six thats more than most acquire during their lifetime.

Once time returned to normal, Dallion floated everything back to the ground. The old man had vowed he wouldnt try to run away, but just to be certain Dallion made him make a second vow.

The giant chasm that had split the dwarven city had diminished to a five-foot hole, forcing the two mages to use the standard way to get back to where it all had started: walking.

The panic that had engulfed the dwarves wasnt that fast to disappear. Mentally experiencing the shock, many of them kept on running about or checking in disbelief that they were still alive. It wasnt a pleasant sight. The only positive was that no one was preoccupied with a human making his way into the underground area of the city.

You really have an illusion, Dallion said, now clearly noticing the subtle symbols on Adzorgs clothes. With a bit of concentration, he could even see the effects of the spellnamely, the shape of the dwarf that everyone else saw him as.

I wouldnt have gotten far if I wasnt, dear boy.

And you really want to stop the device, not fix it.

There was a moment of hesitation. Dallion could sense several rings of hostility and fear as he made the observation. For a fraction of a second, the old mage was caught in a state between flight and fight. Soon enough, the intensity of emotions diminished.

You saw a memory fragment, he said.

I thought youd seen it as well.

Your mind was working far too fast for me to witness anything. And lets not forget that not all memory fragments are shared. He cleared his throat. How much did you see?

Enough to know who gave you the task.

Based on the mages reaction, it was something he had hoped Dallion wouldnt have learned. At the same time, it also explained his obsession. Spending all that time gathering the pieces, the deal he had made with the Azure Federation to destroy the Academy, they were all worth the price to ensure the worlds existence. Still, he could have just explained it all.

Harp, do you trust him? Dallion asked.

No. The reply didnt delay.

You think hes lying about the device?

Thats the reason I cannot trust him. Until its destroyed, hell sacrifice anyone and anything, no matter the circumstances. In order to save the world, he might even break a Moon vow.

Whats in the statue, anyway? A gear?

An energy marble, he explained. Something I found in the fallen south. With it Im just a few more pieces from opening the bridge to the other part of the timepiece.

After twenty minutes of walking, the dwarf guards actually started doing their jobs. Checks were restored, paths were blocked to the point that even the Order couldnt get Dallion through. Among other things, the bishop appeared to have vanished without a trace. Guards and clerics were frantically going through the city in an attempt to find him. Even the royal family was concerned. However, Dallion had the feeling theyd never find him. As an alternative, he and Adzorg resorted to the only option available to them: go to one of the empty dwarf taverns and waste a few hours until things calmed down enough for them to return to the traders district.

Copyettes are really out there, he said in a low voice as he took a sip of something barely drinkable. The spell he had cast ensured that no one but Adzorg would understand his words.

Thats the suspicion. Even I dont know for certain. The mage looked at his drink, but refused to touch it. They have appeared here and there. No one can deny that. Some might be tempted to say

that there aren't as many as people claim, but they're missing the big picture. The ones that people know about are only the failures. As one might say, there might be a whole lot of them living like normal people and it would take a kaleidovristo to prove different.

That was interesting. Clearly, the artifacts ability to see echoes wasn't the only reason they were difficult to find. Everyone in the know wanted to make sure that the people they surrounded themselves with were those who they claimed to be.

I thought magic saw through that.

Dear boy, magic is nothing more than a very sophisticated tool. It can help you achieve wonders as long as you know how to apply it. There are spells for detecting slimes. The Academy is full of them. In theory, if any copyette were to set foot in the Learning Hall or any of the other buildings, the White Eye would know. The problem the man pushed his drink away from him is that it doesn't work. Just as there are spells and devices to reveal something, there are ways to make it undetectable. In general, I pride myself as someone who could see the flaw in patterns, but I wasn't able to catch the copyette that claimed to be Diroh. Not an easy task, I must admit.

Right. There was no way to know whether that was true, or Adzorg was just being nice. So, what do we do now?

We wait till we can get the item we're searching for, buy it, and then

I mean after that. What happens when you have all the pieces for the device?

The left part of Adzorg's mouth curved up in a semi smile.

You know what will happen, Adzorg's echo said within Dallion's realm. I'll open the portal and destroy the device. After that, nothing really matters.

And the world will be saved, Dallion couldn't keep himself from saying. And after that, everything will be like before.

Dear boy, nothing will be like before. Just look around you.

Given that they were the only people in the tavern, that didn't mean much. The broader meaning was clear, though. Serious internal conflicts in the empire had brought about a war that encompassed the entire world. Even with the threat of the Star gone, as well as the world's destruction, there were three established powers striving for supremacy. The stakes were high enough that each of the forces had no choice but to become aggressive lest they be destroyed by their enemies.

While pondering the options, Dallion took a few moments to focus on the small things in his surroundings. The new level of his magic trait had allowed him to notice the small nuances of magic in everyday life. He could see the pattern of the magic threads within the dwarf innkeeper; patterns that made it possible for them to shape metal at touch. If he looked closer, he could almost see enough to try and mimic it through a spell. The result wouldn't be nearly as effective, but with a bit of effort, and a few tries, he could get the aura sword to slice through metals as if they were made of water.

Turning back to Adzorg, he was just about to make a witty comment when he noticed a slight discrepancy. Beneath the illusion and magic symbols, a single thread of magic emerged from him, moving all the way to Dallion himself. The strange thing was that it didn't seem like a standard thread, rather it was there but also wasn't, like a theoretical physics concept.

You have to be kidding, Dallion thought, then entered his realm.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Reality shifted, taking him into the peaceful domain of his realm. The sun was shining brightly in the middle of the purple sky. A faint freeze tempted Dallion to relax for a bit, possibly putting his worries on pause. Sadly, that would have to wait. There was a very specific reason he had arrived.

Concentrating, Dallion focused his layer vision on the sky. The purple changed from a single color to an endless array of purple threads. That in itself wasn't new.

Dallion cast a flight spell, then flew up and looked deeper. It took a while, but among the threads, he noticed one that didn't belong there. It seemed to come from elsewhere, weaving its way through the mesh and moving down.

Harp, he said, following the thread. Get ready.

No weapons were summoned, no other guardians called. Harp would be enough to deal with this if it came to it. Also, Dallion doubted that Adzorg had attempted a realm invasion.

The thread twisted throughout the entire realm, doing its best to blend in as much as it could. With Dallion's current abilities, though, it was no longer possible for it to remain unseen. Systematically, he followed it all the way to its final location—the ring library.

A sense of nostalgia passed over Dallion as he entered the small structure. There was a time when he had been impressed beyond measure. Now, the place seemed small, cramped, and the number of scrolls it held was puny in comparison to what he had seen at the Academy.

Adzorg's echo was sitting in a rocking chair, casually reading from a tome of historic poetry. Back in the day, he had tried getting Dallion to read it and enhance his culture yet the otherworlder had never given it a chance.

Hello, Nil, Dallion said, stopping five feet away.

I always knew you had the potential, the echo said, turning the page. I guess that's what happens once you get over eighty in magic.

Guess so. You made a few other mistakes. Dallion went to the nearest shelf and took a random book. Without the memory fragment, I might not have made the connection.

Maybe that would have been better for everyone concerned.

Reverse echoes, Dallion said. Echoes that aren't echoes, but your representation in a realm.

Similar to what the copyettes could do. I didn't invent them, but whoever did must have been inspired by that.

Why, though?

I wanted to keep an eye on you and see you progress. You must admit that I did help now and then.

There were other ways.

Possibly, but I wanted to have an apprentice again. That's one of the things. After all this time, I missed teaching otherworlders. Your ability to solve problems, your lack of limitations—there's so

much about you that is fascinating. No two of you are alike. Alien, Leora, Gassil, all had very different skills and approaches. Experience has shown that if I trained you myself, then sooner or later you'd have rejected everything I told you.

Yet, if you'd do the same as an echo copy of the original, I'd think of you as someone different. Dallion returned the tome to its place. And I did.

Indeed. I'm curious, Adzorg looked over his shoulder. What other mistakes did I make? Or did you just say that to make me feel bad?

I, Dallion replied. Several times you'd use I when you were supposed to say my original. It wasn't obvious at first, but now.

I. Well, I'd like to say that I'd remember that, but by the looks of things, there'd no longer be any point.

Maybe you're right. A thought came to Dallion's mind. This timepiece you made. How does it deal with the world rejection issue? When I was in the world of furies, it wouldn't accept me.

That's because you just went there unprepared. The device I made should take care of all side effects and he stopped. You're planning on returning, he added after a while. You want to go back to Earth.

Would it be possible?

It should be. But there's every chance it would be a one-way trip. I cannot allow the timepiece to exist.

What if there was a way?

Chapter 790: The Timepiece

It took a full day for the city to return to a near state of normalcy. Early the next morning, a member of the local Order of the Seven Moons announced that the bishop had been called to the archbishop in relation to the extraordinary events that had occurred. The excuse was completely false, but managed to convey enough calm so as to let the inhabitants worry about other matters. After all, if the Order was looking into something, there was every chance that they would prevent it from happening. The few who really knew what was going on nobility, awakened, and people in high enough positions were already discretely making preparations to leave before the real catastrophe took place.

Taking advantage of the Order's hospitality, Dallion spent the night at the temple. Unable to do the same, Adzorg had to resort to alternative methods. Casting the illusion of a respected dwarf had taken care of his greatest issue, even if it hadn't allowed him to get anywhere close to the merchant in question. In that case, the issue wasn't as much one of trust as in the puncture being in the vicinity of the respective shop. As a result, the dwarf ruler had dispatched a large number of guards, and a few high-ranking nobles, to examine the matter.

Think they'll let us approach by evening? Dallion asked, leaning against a wall.

The puncture had become an instant curiosity, attracting a lot of onlookers to the point that even a human wouldn't be noticed.

Doubtful, the mage replied, still in his dwarf illusion. They were sent today, which means they'll spend the rest of the day pretending to be doing something.

And youre sure none of them will see through you?

The spell is flawless, the mage said. I checked several times. Not even the archmage would be able to see through it.

Then how can I see you? Dallion wondered. Initially, he had thought that the reason might be his new magic level, but after a few days, he was starting to think that there was another reason.

You could have told me that you were Nil, Dallion said.

You wouldnt have gained much.

Yeah, right. All the times you lied that you didnt know this or that. Then it turned out youre an archmage!

Thats one of the reasons I preferred to remain an echo, Adzorg laughed.

In the merchants quarter, several of the guards moved away after placing a solid fence of metal around the hole.

Thats unexpected, the mage said, nodding in the direction of the guards. Looks like theyre done already.

Not so much into wasting time, then, Dallion whispered, although he, too, found it slightly strange.

One of the dwarf nobles remained for a few minutes, talking to a guard captain while the rest expediently left the area. Even from this distance, Dallion could tell that the guard wasnt at all pleased. Annoyance mixed with a touch of anger clearly emanated from him. On the outside, he remained unfazed. Nodding calmly, he agreed with everything said, then accompanied his superior after the rest of the group.

There was no reaction from the crowd. For the next few minutes, no one dared approach, expecting the guards to return and continue with whatever they were doing. Once that didnt happen, the first one dared make his way to the hole.

No need to rush, Adzorg said. Let the shopkeepers open first.

Seeing that nothing had befallen the first wanderer, part of the crowd tentatively followed in small groups.

Better not, Dallion said, heading in the direction of the quarter. The more time we waste, the greater the chance that he leaves the city.

It wasnt often that Dallion had stood up to Nil, he had stood up to Adzorg even less. Now, though, he felt he had to. He could feel a sort of tenseness in the air, one that had been growing ever since they had escaped the double vortex. At first, he believed it to be stress, or exhaustion, from what had happened. However, even a full day of calm and rest had done little to ameliorate the situation. Quite the opposite, it was starting to make him feel on edge.

Not another crisis, Dallion said to himself. The last thing he needed was the curse to come into effect.

In a fast but steady pace, the otherworlder made it all the way to the shop in question. Some of the statues the larger and less expensive ones remained outside the building itself. The valuable artifacts those he had come for had been moved.

Arriving at the door, Dallion knocked.

I suggest I do the talking, Adzorg said. We had come to an arrangement before you intervened.

That was true, just as everyone in the vicinity had seen the two of them fight with spells in the air. It was an outright mystery how the dwarves hadn't tried to throw him in a dungeon. In their place, that was the first thing he would have done, regardless of the Orders backing.

Is your owner in there?

Dallion asked the building's guardian.

He could sense the entity's presence, yet the guardian chose not to respond.

Unwilling to give up, or give Adzorg the satisfaction, Dallion pressed the handle. The door opened.

Oh, the mage noted. I didn't expect we'd get lucky. His fingers moved, drawing a series of symbols on Dallion and himself.

If there was any sign of this being a trap, Dallion would have reacted. However, his recently acquired magic let him see the elements of the spell before it was complete. The old mage wasn't trying to harm him; on the contrary, he was casting an illusion, making them invisible to the eyes of everyone else.

Suppressing his desire to burst into a dozen instances while the spell was taking place, Dallion remained where he was, then quickly entered the shop. Adzorg followed, closing the door behind them.

The amount of light inside was barely enough to make out the contents of the room. Thankfully, that was no issue for a perception trait of over fifty.

I don't see any of the big trinkets, Dallion said, looking around. Meanwhile, Adzorg cast a quick spell to boost his own senses. Any chance he could have sold it?

Doubtful. Even if he had enough time, I would have known. The part is somewhere here.

Using his aether vision, Dallion could see all the magic threads of everything in the room. There were more of them than one might think: with most metal being constantly manipulated by dwarf native magic, they were in most common items, not to mention the more exotic artifacts that the merchant kept. Beyond the threads, there was something else something Dallion was able to spot thanks to his forging skills.

The floor, he said. It's made of metal and it also has a ladder in one spot.

Yes, dear boy. Adzorg bent down and drew a triple spell circle on the floor. What better way to hold your valuable merchandise than to have it beneath the floor?

What's the point? Every dwarf can reach it.

The point, as you put it, was never to hide the items, just to store them.

An opening formed, leading down into darkness. Adzorg started casting a spell, but before he could, Dallion had waved his aura sword and done it for him. A dozen balls of light floated down, revealing a vast chamber. Even from this angle Dallion could see several statues, some of them large as the house itself.

One after the other, the mages leaped down. Without any explanations, Adzorg quickly rushed through the massive chamber. At several statues, he stopped for a second before quickly moving on.

Is it here? Dallion followed, yet a voice in the back of his mind kept whispering that something was not right.

Definitely. Adzorg stopped in front of a clay statue that resembled something similar to an upright hippopotamus. Without any hesitation, he reached into the statues stomach area, his fingers drawing the spell in the process.

A torrent of dust erupted in the smallest explosion Dallion had seen. The old mage reached into the hole, his hand moving in all the way to its elbow. When he pulled it back out, there was a small sphere inside. Now that Dallion could get a closer look at it, the item seemed familiar. In fact, it was very similar to something he had procured once for the general.

Thats a demon eye, he whispered.

Oh, please not you too. Adzorg glanced at him, annoyed, while cleaning the gem from the dust covering it.

One of a set of five, the otherworlder continued. It went missing a few decades ago He should have paid more attention during Adzorgs memory fragment. Just like the one I bought for the general from Lanitols night auction

And so you did, the mage said, casting a spell with his left hand. The spell was a one circle transformation spellharmless on its own, but capable of changing one magic symbol into another.

Suddenly, the illusion spell that hid Dallion transformed. Instinctively Dallion burst into instances, ready to engage in combat. Fortunately, there was no need. While the illusion of invisibility had gone, the new spell formed a protective layer of some sortone that he hadnt seen before.

Just a layer of protection. Adzorg removed several of his rings. I dont want you to influence the timepiece.

Its here? Dallion asked, surprised.

In a manner of speaking. More pieces of jewelry were removed, then assembled together. I couldnt risk leaving it behind. A band of purple energy ran across the elements of the newly created bauble. And I definitely couldnt hide it in my realm.

You told me you needed a few more pieces for it to be complete.

I lied. The mage placed the object on the ground, then took several steps back. I couldnt take the risk youd try to stop me and give me to the Order. Not before I ended this.

Dallion tried to take a step forward, but a series of air currents stopped him. It seemed that the magic mesh surrounding him also acted as a sort of prison.

I expect you'll shred through my little spell in less than a minute, but that's all the time I'll need. Don't worry, I'll still take you back to your world if you really want to. We're on the same side, after all.

You have a funny way of showing it. Dozens of Dillions instances emerged, each trying different approaches. Some tried to attack Adzorg directly, others to undo the spell. Alas, what the mage had said was true. Ripping one or even several air currents was easy, but to little avail, since they were instantly replaced by others.

A series of three portals appeared around the bauble, each larger than the last. Once all of them were present, the timepiece itself rose up, as if from the ground.

Beautiful, isn't it? Adzorg asked, almost as an afterthought. It almost pains me to destroy it, but that's the burden I have to carry. This is without a doubt the greatest invention in existence, and ironically, the best it could do for all the people in the world is to have never existed.

Adzorg moved closer. There were five slots on the dial, four of them already had a demon eye. All that remained was the last.

I'll really miss you, dear boy.

The mage placed the final piece. Time slowed down to a crawl. Reunited, the five spheres ignited, shining in a deep green light. A rectangular portal emerged beneath the dial. Looking into it, one could see darkness as black as the void; and still there was no sensation of void, as if the portal the device created went right through it.

I promise to tell Eury and all your friends how you helped save the world. The mage stepped through.