

Leveling up 801

Chapter 801: Taking Control

Vihrogon was the first to predict it. While enemy battle movements had been slow since the last major encounter, they quickly picked up at an alarming pace. The closer everyone got to the vortexes appearance, the bolder the Azures became, targeting imperial cloud forts hourly. The attacks followed a hit-and-run tactic, aimed at testing strength and disrupting positions more than anything else. The local commanders were smart enough not to give in to provocations, but while they could fend off most of the attacks, now and again there would be a fort that would vanish completely.

It didnt take Dallion long to realize the obviousthere was a battle mage among the attackers. He could think of no one else capable of destroying a whole cloud fort in a single spell.

Theyre using nymph tactics, the armadil shield said. More annoying than efficient, but able to rattle people up.

I thought the nymphs were banished by the time you tried to take over the world, Dallion said.

Not against us. Against the copyettes. The nymphs were the ones who put up a fight. Everyone else just hid in their towns and cities, focusing on revealing the copyettes already among them.

Did it work?

The hiding and revealing part? Not particularly. It did give rise to lots of devices with questionable functionality.

Apparently, the Azure Federation remained true to their name. On the third day, as Dallions cloud fort was approaching the meeting point with Katkas group, things took a surprising turn for the better. Two imperial legions had managed to overwhelm the Azures defenses, taking several towns and even a whole city. According to reports, the ruling nobles were killed and the citys overseer assumed the role, vowing loyalty to the highest-ranking legionary officer until a full noble arrived from the empire to take over.

The success had raised spirits within the cloud fort, with mages praising the Moons and marking this as the start of the end for the Azures. The more tactically minded, such as the furies, saw this as a tit for tat. While it was undeniable that the enemys losses were significant, the empire had failed to make any headway when it came to the vortex region. If anything, its forces had retreated in an attempt to regroup before another push.

Eager for the fight? Diroh asked.

Dallion didnt budge. He had been spending so much time concentrating on the war map that his immediate surroundings were less relevant.

A month, even a week ago, he would have said yes without question, now he wasnt so sure. It was a fact that while Grym and his group still existed, thered be no end to the war. At the same time, he was back to following the Path of the Empath.

Eager for it to be over, he replied. Even as he said it, though, Dallion couldnt kick the feeling that something was not right.

Whats wrong?

Im not sure.

Youre just like the archmage. The fury tilted her head to the side. Hes also obsessed with failure.

That was probably one of the things Dallion and Alien saw eye to eye on. Neither of them could afford a loss, and achieving even a small victory against an opponent who had been kicking their ass filled them with paranoia.

What am I missing? Dallion wondered.

Ive learned how to remove my novice mark, Diroh said, in an attempt to attract his attention. I figured it out a while back, but there never was an opportunity to try it out. With all the lessons and attention back in the Learning Hall.

Thats nice, Dallion replied, clearly not into it.

Shield, are you sure theres nothing wrong? he asked mentally.

Oh, there is something, no doubt about it, the guardian replied. But not enough to keep you from paying attention to a charming fury.

Shield

What do you want me to say? Yes, they are leading you into a trap. Everyone can see that. However, at this point, there isnt much that can be done about it. You have scouts all over the area. Theres no concentration of troops anywhere close. Even if he casts his destructive ray spells, there are a dozen cloud forts around you. As long as none of them turns against you, theres nothing to be concerned about.

Dallion didnt like the answer. Following Vihrogons advice, he had made sure that all the cloud forts in his group remained loyal to the empire. Even if a spy was aboard, there was no way for them to achieve anything more than a skirmish within the fort itself. Suddenly, a terrible thought crossed his mind. What about Katka? No one could be sure about her forces. After the womans last defeat, she had retreated with her forces, but there was no telling whether all of her forces really were hers. There probably had been too much chaos to notice, and it was just like the enemy to bide their time until the last possible moment.

Tell all fort mages to cast shield spells! Dallion yelled. Tisaku isnt waiting for us to approach. Hes on one of Katkas cloud forts!

Echoes conveyed the order among all other forts. Mages rushed, casting nine-circle spells in a rushed attempt to surround the massive clouds with aether barriers. Dallion himself started a far more complex spell, aiming to cast a protective sphere around his. Halfway through, a beam of fire shot up from the ground, burning through a cloud less than five hundred feet from Dallions.

Lightning crackled within what was left of the cloud fort as the beam continued towards the sky. The group was under attack. Unfortunately for Dallion, his guess was only half right. The enemy battle mage had lulled them into his trap, but he hadnt been hiding in another cloud fort, but on the ground they had flown over.

Those idiot scouts! Dallion gritted his teeth as he completed his spell.

A massive sphere of purple emerged, surrounding the cloud fort just in time to avoid a direct hit from a second ray coming from below. Dallions current magic proved insufficient to stop the attack outright. The barrier cracked under the pressure, maintaining its integrity for a few seconds before shattering. Thankfully, those few seconds proved enough for many of the other mages aboard to cast their aetherbarriers at the exact spot of the beam, taking on the brunt of its force. The cloud stretched to the side, allowing an opening to form within it.

Dallion watched with a sense of amazement as the spell shattered everything in its path, then passed through, continuing into the sky.

Crimson furies flew off the dozens of cloud forts in the hundreds, swooping down to find the source of their attacks. Meanwhile, the mages remained, casting additional barriers as a means of defense should other devastating spells follow.

Di, stay close! Dallion burst into instances, several of them casting protection spells, while dozens joined the crimson furies heading to the ground.

Thats the problem of sending guards to fight a war. Vihrogon sighed.

You think hell kill them off? Dallion asked, combining magic and layer vision as he searched for the enemy battle mage.

Theyre so useless that I doubt hell bother. Thats why the empires been losing. Big battles require big vision, not petty skirmishes. This isnt a couple of nobles squabbling for a few fields. And until your side realizes that, theyll keep losing no matter how many of them are thrown into the fight.

Dallion considered his words for a moment.

The furies are the best scouts we have, he said tentatively.

You dont need scouts. What you need is a series of mass spells that would cover the ground with hail for miles away. The battle mage is long gone by now. And even if he wasnt, what will a couple of furies do against him?

Aether shards rained down from a few distant cloud forts. Having finished their barrier spells, a few mages must have taken the initiative and engaged in combat. Naturally, as mages, they didnt see the need to warn any of the furies about it. It was purely thanks to luck and the furies fast reactions that they managed to fly out of the killing zone with nothing but a few minor injuries.

Idiots, Dallion thought. Im surrounded by idiots.

If a few days ago he had been impressed by the success of his enemy, now he was astonished that the empire was still standing. Alien hadnt been exaggerating when he had described the shortcomings of his given army. Individually, everyone was doing exactly what they should. Each group of furies swept through part of the area, using air currents to slice up anything suspicious. The mages had also performed quite well, protecting their cloud forts. Even the misguided attackers had cast a rather intricate set of spells, transforming the area beneath them into a mile-wide pincushion. However, there wasnt even a semblance of overall coordination.

Now, Dallion understood what Vihrogon meant. The forces that had been sent to the front thought like guards and acted appropriately. For them, fighting an army was no different from fighting a hundred small skirmishes simultaneously the same thing they had done on multiple occasions. Border conflicts weren't rare even before the latest events. However, an all-out war hadn't occurred for centuries. Even the war against the furies didn't count: back then, the furies were the ones attacking. The empire had held their ground and destroyed the enemy as they approached. Also, as it was painfully obvious now, the battle mages had gained more than enough practice as shown by how they used it against Dallion just now.

The search continued for twenty minutes before Dallion ordered everyone back to the cloud forts. All that was found were the bodies of a few low-level mages lying on the ground.

According to Adzorg, their role must have been to create a portal for the real battle mages to cast their spell safely far away, then redirect it to their real targets.

At this point, one thing became painfully obvious. Someone had to take on the role of commander, and provide guidance and instructions to all the individual units. Sadly, that someone had to be Dallion.

I want a dozen scouts per cloud fort! he ordered in the war room. Eight of them five miles from the fort in every direction, including back! Four right beneath at all times! If anyone sees anything suspicious, they are to let the cloud fort and me know. Also, I want all mages divided into two groups: attack and defense. If the fort is under attack, the defense group protects it, while the attack group counterattacks, only this time avoiding our own troops!

No one said a word. None of them knew that Dallion had become a noble, but subconsciously they were already accepting him as one. Not a single person dared argue or disagree. As far as they were concerned, the orders had come from the emperor himself.

Feels different being a noble, doesn't it? Vihrogon asked. Now you understand why so many of them order people about. It's childishly easy, and to many incredibly addictive.

I'm not a noble, Dallion replied mentally.

You don't have the time, but you are a domain ruler. You might like to believe differently, but since you passed through the gate, from here on you are the Moons equal.

The Moons equal. It was a dangerous notion to consider, but also very much true. If he chose, he could create an area in which he had the same authority as the Moons. What he had considered to be arrogance in all the domain rulers he'd seen was actually awareness of what they had become. The one thing he had to avoid was the temptation of viewing himself as the Moons rival.

Someone, give me a report on Katka. Dallion turned to the nearest white-haired fury.

Battle mage Katka's cloud fort is unharmed, the fury instantly replied. She welcomes you and is grateful

Tell her to come here at once. Also, inform the archmage that Ill be taking over the day-to-day planning. Not that Alien bothered with that stuff. So far, he had done nothing but remain locked in his fake room refusing to interact with reality.

Yes, battle mage! The fury flew off.

Um, battle mage? Diroh asked.

Dallions first instinct was to snap at her. It was only thanks to his high mind trait that he managed to keep himself from doing so.

Yes? he asked with the barest of smiles.

Awe and infatuation radiated from the ice fury. Youve given instructions to everyone else. How can I be useful?

Dallion looked at her intently for several seconds. She had grown a lot since her awakening, but unlike Jiroh, she wasnt an otherworlder. Her path to nobility was going to be a lot slower and more difficult, but there was a lot she could help with in the meantime.

Learn. He gently placed his hand on her cheek. For now, just watch and learn.

Chapter 802: The Calm Before the Rush

Two more ground groups found, the communication fury announced in the war room.

The role had been established by Dallion, who decided that it would be more efficient for one fury to make the announcements rather than everyone. The notion seemed logical, yet as it turned out, the awakened world had a different way of doing things. From what Vihrogon had explained, it was more common for the decision makers to have the echoes and receive the information directly. Lacking that, they would split into hundreds of instances and maintain direct communication with everyone of importance. Dallions method, as weird as it appeared to everyone, had the benefit that it made the information just as accessible to non-awakened as everyone else.

One of them managed to create a beam portal before being killed. There was a slight pause. One cloud fort was lost.

That wasnt the sort of report Dallion liked to hear. Somehow, despite all his attempts, the enemy continued to chip away at his forces. Granted, it was considerably less than had he not taken command, but having lost three cloud forts in a matter of hours couldnt be seen as a good start of a campaign. In turn, the Azures had lost a few dozen people, all of them low-level mages and, if Dallion were to guess, with symbiotic echoes.

Increase the distance between forts, but continue to cover the entire ground, Dallion ordered.

Theres no need for that, Vihrogon said in a calm fashion. If youre concerned about losing forces, you should just have more furies in the skies.

Dallion thought about it, but didnt add anything.

Nil, any specific spells I should be worried about? He asked.

Adzorg, the mage, sighed. I'd suggest moving closer to the ground as we approach the vortex fields. Too much of your force is in the sky. That makes them an easy target.

For example?

Air-based storms, for one thing. Easy to trigger, difficult to stop. At best, they'll disorganize things and keep furies and mages busy unravelling air currents. At worst

Have all forts on the front line fly closer to the ground, Dallion ordered. Thanks, Adzorg.

My pleasure, dear boy. I must say the current role suits you well.

For some reason, he didn't feel that as a compliment. The whole transition to a domain ruler felt strange and natural at the same time. In the blink of the eye, so many of his past problems seemed so petty and insignificant. Stranger still, they weren't replaced by a new set of problems, but rather opportunities. As much as Dallion hated himself for thinking in terms of managerial phrases found on the internet, it was true in the very real sense of the word. Being a noble acknowledged that he had made it. From here on, everything seemed like a huge game of rivalries finding means to grow faster than others like him, but not so fast as to alarm those above.

Is Katka here, yet? he turned to a crimson fury by the entrance.

The battle mage informed that there are matters she had to attend to before making her way here.

There was no telling whether that was true, or the woman was just being petty because of Dallion's sudden rise. Weeks ago, he was her subordinate. Now things had changed due to the imperial decree. Unfortunately, it was Dallion's turn to need her assistance. If he tried to impose his authority too much, she might rebel in subtle and not-so-subtle ways just as he used to.

I'll go see her myself, he said with a deliberate edge in his voice. Di, keep an eye on things here. I won't take long.

The ice fury nodded. On her shoulders, the cloud fox opened its eyes. No longer forced to hide or condense into pieces of jewelry, it felt at home among the clouds, spending most of its time curled up on its owner. Even so, it remained just as protective, hissing at anyone who didn't take Diroh seriously.

Walls of cloud opened up for Dallion as he walked, providing direct access to where he wanted to go. Casting a flight spell, he made his way out of the cloud fort, right to the one Katka was on. There was no need to ask for directions; her cloud was double the size of the standard ones. Also, Dallion could see the concentration of magic clear as day. In his eyes, most of the forts looked like dull clumps of neon light with fireflies flickering within. Alien and the battle mages were considerably brighter, visible as purple candle flames even from a distance; and Katka's cloud had lots of candle flames.

You can chill a bit, you know, Vihrogon said. The greatest mistake rookie commanders make is to stress out before the fight.

Im calm, Dallion lied.

As calm as a platypain in a barrel of hedgerels, the guardian snorted. Enjoy the calm while you have it. There will be more than enough chaos to come. One thing about wars you might have an idea when theyll start, but you never know when theyll end.

Talking from experience?

Something like that.

A crack of blue sky appeared on the horizon, disturbing the blackness of the night. For some reason there hadnt been any Moons in the last two days nothing but constellations. In calmer times, one might have found that soothing, not now, though. It wasnt like the Moons to look away before the start of a battle.

Furies stood to attention in midair, as Dallion flew by. The moment he set foot on Katkas fort, he was greeted by one of the armor wearing crimson furies which held the rank of fort commander. The obvious lack of mages indicated that at least one group of people had issues with his newfound authority.

All part of Academy politics, dear boy, Adzorg said. Better brace yourself for a lot of passive aggressiveness.

Did that happen when you were archmage?

Youd be surprised. Theres a good part, though.

Which is?

In nine cases out of ten, the passive aggressive greeting is followed by a lot of ass kissing.

Welcome, battle mage, the male fury said with a polite bow. We are honored by your presence. Battle mage Katka is expecting you in her quarters.

Dallions music skills told him that was an obvious lie. The last thing the woman wanted was to see him right now. Her typical brand of envy emanated all the way through the layers of cloud matter, as if she were yelling at the top of her lungs.

Im glad. Part of Dallion surprised himself with his answer. Lead the way.

Katka was in her room, as was stated. Several healing circles were active around her, attempting to reconstruct patches of burned flesh. However, as soon as the top layer crumbled off, the one beneath curdled and dried up again, as if the spell afflicting her was still in effect.

Hello, hello, she greeted him the moment he walked in. I would have been with you in a bit.

No one told me about this.

Memory spell, she said calmly, gesturing for the fury to leave. Limited, but good enough everything considered. Congratulations on the promotion, by the way. I heard that the emperor himself called you. Lucky. Ive only seen him half a dozen times, and never alone.

This changed Dallions calculation somewhat. Up to now, he had assumed that he could rely on Katka to defend part of the vortex fields. Apparently, she was the one needing defense. Looking closely, he could see the spells magic strands interwoven among her own threads. As long as they were there, they would continue the effect.

How did it happen?

Not sure, to be honest. The attack was my mess up, but the spell was new. It wasnt anything Id seen before.

Nymph magic, the harpsisword guardian said in Dallions domain.

It burned through three others before it went through my barriers and onto my skin. Lucky I survived.

Very lucky, Harp added. Its a battle spell meant to burn through walls.

I dont remember the Academy teaching anything of the sort.

It doesnt, Adzorg said. A few nymph spells have been reconstructed thanks to excavation finds, but nothing this powerful. I would have known.

No chance they could have kept it hidden?

Dear boy, if they had such knowledge half a year ago, why do you think theyd make an arrangement with me?

Moving closer, Dallion concentrated, focusing on the threads in the wound. They were worse than dog hair stuck in a woolen sweater. Taking them out would be possible, but he had to be careful about it.

Ill try to remove the spell, he said.

I already tried that. The pain made me faint. The slow and steady method will have to do, she said with a hiss. To think Id ever end up quoting my teachers from the Learning Hall. Life does come with its ironies.

Just hold still. Dallion split into twenty instances.

With exact precision, he extended his own magic threads beyond the tips of his fingers, creating the equivalent of minuscule pincers. Once that was done, he slowly grabbed hold of one of the less entangled spell fragments and pulled.

The absorption was instantaneous, but painful. For a moment, he felt as if a hedgehog had rolled up in his hand. It was only the high body trait that kept him from flinching.

Has anyone told you the situation? he asked, pulling out another strand. This time, his action was more precise than the last. Two down, about a few hundred left to go.

That youre my boss now? Yes, I heard. She looked at the affected spot on her left arm. How did you boost your magic so much?

Luck. Two more strands were pulled out. Three quarters of his instances were far from successful, resulting in the womans skin ripping. The sight wasnt pretty, forcing Dallion instantly to fade out the instances in question. If we dont stop Tisaku from reaching the vortexes, hell do the same.

I figured. So, whats your plan? Something new, I bet, she asked with a note of spite.

We let them come to us.

Youre the new boss, she said, giving the distinct impression that something similar had been attempted in the past. Absorbing high-level vortexes doesnt always end well, just in case youre wondering.

Itll be fine. I have a Sword Marshal to advise me now. Thats not why Im here.

You want to use me as bait, dont you? Why not? I did a stupid attack once, of course Ill

No, he interrupted, pulling out three more strands. I want you to teach me all the spells you know.

Even without using music, the determination in his voice was enough to give Katka pause. He no longer sounded like an apprentice, or even a mage, but rather someone expecting to be obeyed.

That will take a while. Are you sure?

There was no need for a verbal response. A few minutes later, the two entered the realm of a random item and the teaching began. The exercises that Dallion couldnt master in the Learning Hall were complete in seconds. After a few more attempts to gauge his skill, Katka gave up and just started demonstrating her spells, one after the other. Now and again, she would offer to teach him the method of how to make his own, yet each time he declined with polite firmness.

Days passed, then weeks. It took time to accumulate what the woman had learned in a lifetime, even if in the real world it would be done in a moment.

While the training took place, Dallion was clearly able to see all of Katkas weaknesses. True, she excelled at speed and combat magic, but was vastly overconfident and not as fast as she thought herself to be. Dallion could see the errors hastily corrected though her superior speed the lapses in targeting, and the almost ever-present hesitation before casting anything above a ten-circle spell. It was no wonder she had never been made a battle mage during the previous regime. A talented amateur, she definitely didnt have what it took, despite all the benefits that being an otherworlder granted her.

After two and a half months, there was nothing else of value that Katka could give. At that point, Dallion decided to put an end to the training.

Youve improved, she admitted reluctantly. But youre still just a copycat.

Dallion didnt respond. For the moment, combining the spell elements he had amassed was going to serve him more than enough.

I dont know how to perform the ray spell, Katka added. Battle mages teach each other, no outsiders. Its the same for all battle magic.

We wont need it. Dallion had seen the spell performed from up close. When the Moonstone power was flowing through him, he had even understood it. Sadly, no longer. After we get back to the real world, well rush the fields.

Argus and the rest will as well.

No. They're already there. And I'll make them reveal themselves.

Chapter 803: The Tubular Realm Network

Scatter and attack, Dallion said to a row of white-haired furies behind him.

Without delay, each conveyed the orders to the thousands that filled the skies. The area they covered was massive. There were countries that weren't as large. Yet, it wasn't them that would perform the attack. Their real task had been to protect the cloud forts from any surprise attacks.

Hundreds of mages cast their spells, launching aether projectiles and balls of fire. A hailstorm of purple and orange rained destruction on the ground. The intensity of the spells was such that in places it created clusters of glass in the soil itself.

Going a bit overkill, dear boy? Adzrogs echo asked.

Dallion continued looking silently at the battlefield. It was extreme, but it was also the minimum needed to get the enemy to reveal himself.

Tell Katka to keep an eye on the ground, he told one of the furies, then turned to Diroh.

The ice fury was standing a short distance away. A sense of subdued fear emanated from her. Dallion would have been concerned if it hadn't. No one in this world had seen destruction on such a massive scale since the fury wars, and even then, the intensity would have been less. The old battle mages, as powerful as they were, remained few in number. The same could be said about awakened furies. Right now, one witnessed the full might of the Academy focused on a single point.

Diroh assumes command of this fort, he added.

Me? The fury stared at him blankly.

Dallion allowed himself a smile. He could sense that the white-haired furies supported the idea. The crimson ones might create some issues, but they wouldn't dare go against his orders, not yet in any event.

Taking another look at the former fields below, Dallion went to Diroh, continuing in a low voice so only she could hear.

You'll be fine. You just need to make sure that there are no problems in the air. Katka will handle the rest.

The ice fury nodded.

You'll have to do it alone. Dallion gave the mental order for his echo to disappear. The momentary shock in Diroh's eyes told him that it had. You've learned enough. You should be able to handle it.

I've seen crap. The spark of rebellion shined through. Jiroh would have been proud. You keep bouncing me from place to place, hoping I'd pick up enough!

I know. He placed his hand on the fury's cheek. And you have each time.

I'm not an otherworlder, Dal. How many times must I tell you? Following your trail isn't as easy as you think.

You're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for, Dallion thought. She had to be. Win or lose, events such as today were likely going to become a reality, at least until Grym was taken down.

Take care of the clouds, he said loudly, pulling his hand away. We'll discuss things after I come back.

We better, Diroh whispered.

With a nod, Dallion then cast a flight spell, then flew to the edge of the cloud fort.

Have them keep casting until I reach the ground. He burst into two hundred instances. It was the first time he had burst into so many. It didn't seem effortless by any stretch of the imagination, though it wasn't as difficult as he expected.

Are you sure it's the right move? The armadil shield asked.

I learned this trick from a memory fragment with grandfather, Dallion said.

That's not what I had in mind.

Flying beneath the layer of attack proved challenging. Even with all his skills, three quarters of his instances were easily hit. The remaining continued further down. The intensity of the spells showed no sign of decreasing. Some might even say that more than a few mages were deliberately aiming to hit their new commander. Dallion had little doubt that some did. At the same time, he was more than confident in his abilities to avoid similar clumsy attempts. Adzorg had even joked that this was a good way to get used to the life that awaited him.

The moment Dallion set foot on the ground, all spells ceased. There was no noise, no smoke, just a few pools of fire where the fire orbs had landed.

So far, so good. Dallion thought. There were several minutes until the vortexes were supposed to appear. The mages were very adamant regarding their prediction, as was Adzorg.

Glass crackled beneath Dallion's feet. On several occasions, he entered the realm of his shoes to reinforce their soles. As far as the eye could see, there wasn't a single other person. Some might even go as far as saying that the empire had wasted all that effort on a barren patch of land.

Ruby, get ready, Dallion said. The real form of the creature appeared on his left shoulder and flicked its wings. Lux.

The bladebow flew off Dallion's back and pointed down. A ray of blue light shone from the kaleidervisto on it. For the most part, there was nothing the wilderness held no realms or guardians, but after a few moments of flying around, the otherworlders' suspicion was confirmed. A network of realms, each the size of an extremely long straw, crisscrossed the area. Unlike the empire, the Azures had been smart enough to prepare their advance beforehand. All the scouting parties, all the skirmishes, had one role: to create more and more awakened area realms. The realms were insignificant not enough to increase the level of a single noble. However, linked together, they granted Grym the ability to transport his armies from one place to another instantly.

There was no need for any of them to be present. As long as there was a direct connection between this realm and wherever their forces were gathered, an army could spend years marching through the realms and still emerge the second the vortexes appeared. Unfortunately for them, there was an easy way to foil that plan.

AREA AWAKENING REALM INVASION

Reality shifted, bringing Dallion into an enormous tunnel.

You are in the land of TUBE.

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny.

Seriously? Dallion laughed.

The noble named the realm tube? Not that it particularly mattered. There never was any intention of keeping the realm after the vortexes were absorbed. In the best case, a new settlement would be created to serve as a border area. More likely the area would be abandoned while the troops marched onwards towards Priscord Province and the imperial capital.

Unused to the sudden change, the shardfly flew off Dallions shoulder.

Not used to it yet? Dallion asked. Finally, he had reached a point at which he could use his domain ruler ability and transport familiars between realms. Normally, it would be necessary for the realm to be his, but the Vermillion ring provided an exception he could abuse. Its only strange the first time.

Emotions emerged within the body of the shardfly, expressing doubt.

Vihrogon emerged a few steps away from Dallion in his dryad form. Wearing the armor of a Sword Marshal, he took a few steps forward, looking in the distance.

Id say theres a few thousand, the guardian said. A few mages, one minor noble nothing special.

So, Grym wasnt there. Dallion felt more disappointment than relief.

Any battle mages?

No, Vihrogon replied. Just a lot of cannon fodder.

Dallion would have liked to believe that the recent attack had caused the enemy to change tactics, but it was most likely not true. The Azures werent stupid and accustomed to actual combat.

Do you want to take care of them? the Dyrad glanced at Dallion. Or do you want me to handle it?

Theres no need. Dallion drew both his aura sword and harpsisword. Nox, do your thing.

The crackling puma emerged on Dallions head, leaping off with a lazy yawn. For several seconds, it walked about the realm, looking at its paws at every step, as if it had stepped into something disgusting. By the looks of it, a familiars attitude also changed once its owner became a noble.

GUARDIAN CHALLENGE!

Nox had challenged the guardian of TUBE on your behalf!

The guardian has no choice but to respond to the challenge.

A red rectangle emerged. Shortly after, so did the creature of the realm.

TUBE GUARDIAN

Species: ROCKAPEDE

Class: EARTH

Health: 70%

Traits:

- **BODY 20**
- **MIND 10**
- **PERCEPTION 10**
- **REACTION 10**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **BURROW (Species Unique)**

Weakness: SEGMENT LINKS

You gotta be kidding. Dallion stared at the massive centipede made of rock.

Each segment was the size of a small castle, made entirely of flawless granite. Legs the size of towers were attached to them, forming craters on the ground as it walked. The head if it could be even called that was an origami of sharpness, two caves of green light glaring at the otherworlder.

It can't be this weak. Dallion turned to the dryad. Granted, it was a while since he fought common area guardians, but even so, there had to be something wrong.

Carefully, he examined the creature with his magic vision, seeking any trace of illusion spells, and yet it turned out there were none.

Leave it to you to complain about anything, Vihrogon shook his head, then turned around, walking away from the realm guardian. He was shortly followed by Nox, who wasn't in the least interested in the fight.

COMBAT INITIATED

I guess this is really happening. Dallion split into sixty instances and waited.

and waited. The strike seemed to take forever. At one point, he simply couldn't take it anymore and performed a line attack aimed at the left row of the rockapedes legs.

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

Rows of red rectangles emerged as dozens of stone legs were chopped off before the creature could even finish its initial attack. The ease with which it had been done made Dallion feel bad.

We can stop here, he said, filling his voice with the notion of surrender. Just give up.

The rockapede collapsed to the ground, twisting around with such ferocity that the entire tunnel shook. Still, it refused to give in.

Theres no point, Dallion tried again. You know that one more strike will finish you off.

Cant surrender, the guardians voice boomed. Must maintain the realm.

So that was it. The Azures had taken safeguards, making sure that no one could invade their realms. If that were the case, it was also likely that upon Dallions victory, the realm would crumble altogether, vanishing from existence. There was no way to know for certain, but everything suggested it.

Im sorry, Dallion said. That seemed to calm down the creature at least to the level of acceptance. We dont have to end the fight right away.

In the far distance, Dallion was able to see the occupants of the realm bailing out by the hundreds. They had probably seen what was going on and now were eager to return to the real world as quickly as possible. That didnt particularly matter. Once Dallion had finished here, hed join them, appearing on the battlefield at precisely the same moment.

Dont, Vihrogon said.

Dont what?

Youre thinking of leaving it alive, arent you? Reasoning that now that the gig is up, theres no need to destroy it.

Dallion shook his head.

No. He knew that he couldnt afford to leave an active enemy realm this close to the vortex area. Im just sad about it.

After he had purged the void within him, the sensations coming from his empathy trait had returned in full effect. They werent crippling, but were constantly present.

Better luck with your next realm, he whispered, then performed another line strike.

TERMINAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

The rockapede split in two, then disappeared in a cloud of gray dust that faded away.

REALM INVADED

REALM DESTROYED

Two more rectangles emerged, after which Dallion was returned to the real world.

Chapter 804: One Step Behind

Armies popped up like daisies. It wasn't only the few thousand whose realm Dallion had destroyed, but many, many more. In one instant, the entire vortex area transformed into a gathering of armies. Each group was the size of an imperial legion, led by a small cadre of nobles and mages. All that were missing were a few more flags and banners, and this would look like a real medieval battle. Unlike the fashion in which such things were portrayed in most games and movies back on Earth, there was nothing shiny or romantic about it.

Dallion cast a quick spell, sending a beam of light straight above. The enemy forces nearest to them took defensive positions, covering as much of themselves as they could with their shields.

Wrong direction, Dallion said, then split into a hundred instances.

Seconds later, aether projectiles and fireballs rained from the sky.

I bet Katka had been waiting for this, Adzorg said. You've made her week, that's for sure.

Waves of terrors swept through the battlefield, causing Dallion to step back. As a noble and commander, he knew that the attack was necessary if his side didn't defeat the Azures, the Azures would show no mercy. As an empath, though, he felt the pain like thousands of ants crawling into his heart. Vihrogon had assured him that while a person never got fully used to the sensation, they gradually matured enough to accept and endure it.

Soldiers died by the hundreds. The more experienced ones quickly resorted to combat splitting, but even they had a tough time due to their overall density. By the looks of it, they had relied so much on their cunning plan that they never expected there to be any serious fight. If Dallion hadn't tipped their hand, they wouldn't have lost control of the battlefield and would have been able to choose where to appear and how.

Without wasting no time, Dallion looked about with all of his instances, searching for the battle mage. It didn't take long for him to find the logic by which the troops were arranged. The mages and nobles had appeared at the spots where the vortexes were expected to emerge. All less significant awakened were further away, filling in the surrounding space.

Where's the strongest vortex expected? Dallion wondered.

Casting a quick flight spell, he rose into the air. The magic bombardment had largely diminished, as thousands of crimson furies descended from the skies on the armies below. By all accounts it looked like it would be a one-sided massacre, when suddenly it happened a beam of flame shot up, causing a cloud fort to burst like a ball of water thrown on a red-hot sheet of metal.

Dallion quickly turned to find the source of the spell. As he did, two more spells of similar intensity followed, destroying another cloud fort and severely singeing three more.

There you are, Dallion gripped his weapons tightly. Water covered the harp's sword, while magic threads filled the aura sword, rendering it combat ready.

Do you plan on using the Moonstones? Adzorg asked from Dallion's domain?

Not if I can help it! Dallion darted forward.

Suddenly a tower vortex shut up from the ground. Like a destructive way of light, it burned through Azure and imperial troops as it aimed for the sky. A momentary pause followed. Everyone braces, waiting to see whether that was a single event or the wave had really begun. When a second vortex emerged, swallowing its fill, the intensity of the fight exploded. Millions of instances moved about as a veil of miasma throughout the battlefield, making it next to impossible to follow exactly what was going on. Dallion, however, remained fixed on his target. Vortexes rose from the ground all around him, yet he kept on going. All that mattered was for him to end up in the same place as his enemy.

Such a sight, Adzorg sighed. I bet all the mages in the sky are cursing not being able to take advantage of the situation. Most of them would have ended up consumed, of course, but the presence of so many vortexes is beyond dreams. And to think that all of this was caused by our fight.

You say it as if its a good thing. Dallion gritted his teeth, boosting his speed further with a wave of his aura sword.

It all depends on the outcome, dear boy. If you end up victorious, it would have been a good thing. How else would you have gathered such a large part of the Azures forces in one spot? And far from any imperial settlements, I might add.

The old mages point was lost in the heat of battle. Just as one could argue that no settlements would be harmed, it was just as reasonable to assume that there would be a lot less direct clashes if a city wall were present.

Argus! Dallion shouted a few hundred feet from his target.

The only thing that could save the former Academy instructor was the vortex enveloping him before Dallion could reach it.

A massive circle of purple emerged on the ground. Thanks to his traits, Dallion could see it crawling up for fragments of the second.

No!

Even with all his spell boost, at his current speed, he wouldnt manage to get into the vortex on time. It seemed that the battle mage had managed to succeed or had he? Thinking back, Dallion remembered that Adzorg had used a rather particular spell to enter the double vortex back in the dwarf capital.

Show me how to cast that! Dallion ordered in his realm.

Are you sure, dear boy? Its a bit more complicated than most of your usual spells, even those that Katka taught you.

Just do it! Dallion entered his personal realm.

If thats what you want, the echo sighed.

Within Dallions realm, spell patterns were drawn, showing him how to create a spell that had taken decades to be perfected. Copying it was by no means easy even a magic trait of eighty barely made it possible for him to follow, but even days in an awakened realm were not noticed in the real world.

The return to the battlefield was brief and brutal. Unlike before, he couldn't afford to spend seconds getting accustomed. The first thing he did was start casting the vortex breach spell. To his surprise, a second later, it turned out there was no need.

Acting even faster than Dallion himself, Argus Tisaku cast a teleportation spell, vanishing from his current position and reappearing fifty feet away just outside the pillar of purple light.

What the heck? Dallion waved his aura sword, canceling the breach spell mid-way.

Surprised? The other asked, no emotion visible on his face. You're one step behind, novice. Just as before.

I'm not a novice anymore. Dallion frowned.

Just because you've bumped up your magic trait? The other laughed. Or because you've reached level eighty? That's the thing about you otherworlders. You think that because your thinking is unorthodox that you're superior to everyone else.

You should know. You're following the advice of one, Dallion said, using his magic skills to fill the words with despair. Using nobles to transport your troops isn't something you could have thought of.

It's been present in historical records for millennia. True, using it to travel through the wilderness is a new touch, but

Another ray of flame erupted from the ground, destroying a cloud fort. The mage glanced at it casually, then back at Dallion.

Katka must have told you that I'm not alone. There's three of us here, which is more than enough to deal with your army of incompetence.

Three cannot win a war.

Oh, but they can. Confidence emanated from the mage. Three are more than enough to set things in motion. Take the fall of the Academy. How many did that take? Now, the bloated club of incompetents will never recover.

Dallion waved his sword, casting twenty projectile spells. Meanwhile, he also performed a point strike right at the mage. A thin line of water shot out from the hapsisword along with the destructive force. However, instead of striking Nisaku's body, all attacks slid around it, continuing into the vortex where they were instantly consumed.

That's a new one

, Adzorg said. *A protective spell in the threads of his clothes. Who knew that a battle mage could come up with something original?*

It's not original, Harp corrected. It's nymph magic.

I believe you still have something that belongs to me, the battle mage continued, slowly floating towards Dallion. I sense that you have it. No, I sense that you have more than one.

Instinctively, Dallion waved his sword to cast a dozen protective barriers in front of him.

Not that it matters. The vortexes have already provided me with everything I need. Still, some Moonstones would be a welcome bonus. You dont plan on wasting them on combat again, I hope?

Dallion said nothing.

I guess you would.

Why are you so confident? Dallion asked. Back at the Academy, you were always right to the point.

I thought the answer was obvious. After all, youre doing the same.

The last comment made Dallion split into a new set of hundred instances and look around. The overall fight was going as he expected it to be. Both sides had suffered lossesall the more because of the many vortexes that had drilled the battlefieldbut the empire was winning. No one could say that it was even close. And yet all emotions coming from Nisaku were as if he was the one who had won.

Youre trying to use your music skills on me, while Im providing a distraction while others do what they were supposed to all along.

You dont have enough mages to take advantage of the vortexes.

And thats why I said youre still a step behind. The plan never was for my mages to absorb the vortexes. They only needed to siphon enough power for something completely different.

A spot on the ground exploded. With a chilling cry, a creature emerged. As large as an adult wyvern, it rose up into the air, ignoring mages and crimson furies as if they were flies. Seeing it reminded Dallion of the hatchling nests that had emerged in the empire not too long ago. With more pressing issues at hand, no one had given the matter much thought. Hunters had been hired to eliminate the danger, but no real investigation had been conducted regarding the reason.

More creatures emerged, killing friend and foe as they made their way through the ground. Each of them was as big as the first, the magic thread within them glowing with the light of the vortexes.

Damn it! Dallion thought.

Why didnt he think of this earlier? Domain rulers could do more than transport armies, they could transport creatures as well; or, in this case, eggs. The nest filled ruins were nothing but farmsthe means to acquire an instant army. All that was necessary to have it appear was magic, which the vortexes had in abundance.

The shardflies were only a trial run, the battle mage said. This is how the Azure federation wins the skies.

You still havent won yet. Dallion spun his aura sword around. Magic lines and symbols formed around him, composing an intricate sphere-spell. Using his reaction speed to its fullest, hundreds of elements were created in less than a second. Once they were, the sphere collapsed, releasing a beam of fire towards a group of wyverns.

Pasing through them like a hot needle through butter, the flame killed off several of the creatures, continuing on until it hit the ground, creating a large crater of glass.

I see Katkas style, Tisaku said, not seeming in the least bit impressed. She always lacked power. One of the many reasons she was never accepted as one of us.

Im not Katka. Dallion darted right at the mage.

Chapter 805: Disciple's Return

Two beams of magic clashed against one another. The Azure battle mages were pulling out all the stops. They were determined to down the archmages cloud in a show of force, yet if nothing else Alien was more than prepared to deal with them. Apparently, part of the devices in his room were more than illusions.

The beam from the cloud fort pushed the ground spell back, scorching the caster and a few dozen people around him in the process. Unfortunately, that was a small victory. Thanks to the vortexes, the tide of the war was quickly turning. Already the wyverns had acquired air supremacy, forcing the cloud forts to go on the defensive. With the battle on the ground mostly over, the majority of the furies had flown back to their clouds to fend off the ever-growing flock of creatures.

Looks like we have better toys, Dallion said, doing a series of slash attacks as he ripped the air. The advantage of having an aura sword was that he didnt have to hit an enemy to cause damage. With only a bit of effort on his part, trails of completed spells formed right after the blade.

Unfortunately, his opponent was more than capable of countering the attacks while pulling back. Without a doubt, the boost of Dallions magic and his new spells werent comparable to a Moonstone.

Aether barriers appeared and disappeared around the cloud forts like the lights in a disco. Sadly, most of the time they were incapable of dealing with the battle mage magic on the ground.

Youre losing forts faster than youre killing battle mages, Adzorg said in a very calm tone. Ironically, being imprisoned in the imperial palace was a lot safer and more comfortable than being in charge of a few imperial legions.

The empire has already lost, Tisaku said almost in glee. Clearly, losing a large part of his troops and at least one fellow battle mage did little to sour his mood. Its still not too late for you, though. Give me your Moonstones and youll get a chance to join the winning side.

What about Grym? He didnt seem overly thrilled by the idea. Dallion did a series of spark line attacks with his harpsisword.

I said a chance. The other didnt even move a finger, letting the attacks slide off him just as before. Whatever created the effect, it definitely wasnt magic. Dallion didnt know what had the power to ignore a spark attack, and for some reason Harp refused to add anything on the matter. Our young ruler was promised many things. Too many, if you ask me. That has made him more eager than most.

So eager to kill me? Im touched. Dallion spun in the air, performing a multi attack. In addition to the normal strikes, however, he also cast the elements necessary to create an aether echo. Once complete, the entity split away, pulling back several hundred feet from the scene.

You flatter yourself. Tisaku cast a series of lightning launching aether shards. A few of the nearby furies unfortunate enough to try and attack him directly got singed to dust. Thankfully, Dallion and his echo managed to counter the spell with a few dozen aether barriers. You are just a minor ego booster. His real target is the emperor. Should he manage to kill him, then a lot of good things would happen to him.

And you think thats possible? Dallion made an attempt to copy the spell the other had just cast, but without success. Adzorg was right that even in a tight situation, proper mages tended to protect their spells so that they couldnt be copied by enemies. Youve seen the man. If one could call him even human. How can someone like Grym fight against that?

Seems youve seen a glimpse as well? Well, it doesnt matter. Win or lose, an emperor isnt an emperor without his army.

Youre betting on them taking each other out? Dallion asked. Youre aiming to take Gryms place?

Im just a mage. My role is to serve power and to do it well.

It was around that time that Dallion noticed that none of the wyverns had been giving him any grief. The creatures were bloodthirsty to the extreme, attacking everything in sight, yet ever since hed started his fight with the battle mage, none of them had approached.

Using a quarter of his instances, Dallion looked around. Several of the vortexes had already gone, leaving giant holes in the ground. In contrast, the sky had become black with wyverns in spots. At the same time, a perfect sphere of emptiness two hundred feet wide surrounded the battle mage.

Dont worry, therell be plenty more where those came from, Tisaku said. The cloud forts are holding up pretty well for the moment. If Katka was in charge I would have already won. But as much as they struggle, they cant win against a never-ending stream of creatures.

Overplay your hand and the Order might show up.

Thats not how they operate. The Order never interferes in wars. Its only afterwards that they move in, gathering the pieces and picking up the scrap no one wants. They dont care which side wins as long as that side knows not to mess with them. I think theyll welcome the Federation killing the emperor.

That really did sound like the Order. They were the epitome of a soft powerrespecting the laws in each country they had temples in, never openly fighting against anyone, other than Star cultists, and slowly expanding into the unknown areas of the world. If they were to create any settlements other than monasteries, Dallion would have thought that the archbishop was making a play for levels. However, as things stood, the gains were too small for the amount of effort involved.

Whats his secret? Dallion reached out to all the items the battle mage was wearing. Unfortunately, none of them responded. It wasnt that they were unwilling, or that the items had no guardians whatsoever. It was as if something was preventing them from acting openly.

My guess would be echoes, Vihrogon said. Used to be popular back in the day. Of course, that was when there were lots of empaths about. The only certain way to know what an item is thinking is to have a piece of you there with it.

Invasive, but without a doubt efficient. Nymph tactics, unknown spells, dryad countermeasures. There was no chance for this war to have been a sudden development. There was a methodical mind behind this someone that had planned it for decades. More than likely, Grym himself was a piece of a powerful one, but a piece nonetheless. In that case, who was the force behind him? Argus Tisaku? The mage had the mind and discipline for it, but not the desire. As he himself had said, he was one serving power, not being it.

Going on another bout of attacks, Dallion created another aether echo. Having three of him fight simultaneously wasn't something the battle mage had planned for and it showed. Gradually, his calm demeanor shifted. The spells became more vicious and numerous affecting large areas. Then, suddenly, a web of lightning shot out from the man's hands. Half of Dallion's instances were burned out of existence. It would have been nice to say that the attack ended with that.

Even as it was cast, Dallion had noticed quite a few symbols that didn't make sense for a purely destructive spell. It almost seemed that his enemy was trying to mind control him in some way. A few moments later, the otherworlder saw that he was right. The only difference was that the target of the spell wasn't him, but the wyverns.

Symbiote echoes, Dallion hissed.

As much as he could claim to have excelled in the area of combat fighting, he remained one person. With one single spell, the battle mage had just got himself a highly competent and dedicated army. Two more spells of that nature flashed in different parts of the battlefield as the remaining battle mages joined in.

The end phase, Vihrogon said. Better brace yourself.

Hardly had he said it when ten vortex towers blinked out of existence. Dallion expected a torrent of wyverns to stream into the sky. He was half right. Five pillars of creatures emerged, but there was more: batches of rock and aether golems also joined in. Very much like the imperial golems, they rushed along the battlefield, killing any enemy in sight, and sometimes allies, too. With that, the Azures had not only gained control of the sky, but the ground as well.

I warned you, the battle mage said while directing the wyverns to fly at him like a deadly organic spear. Their sheer number was enough to slice through one aether echo despite the losses. It was only through Harp and his hundred instances that Dallion managed to survive a similar attempt.

Get out of here, Vihrogon said.

Dallion continued fighting. As bad as things were, at least he controlled part of the battlefield. If he fled now, the enemy would have the upper hand, not to mention that the emperor wouldn't be too happy about it.

The clouds are already leaving, the dryad guardian continued. Either they're smart and don't want to get killed, or they're already dead.

A cluster of lightning bolts spread from the archmages cloud fort, jumping to the rest. In a single moment, a mesh of electricity and death filled the sky. It was all very spectacular, with one obvious problem: it wasn't meant to get rid of the wyverns that were taking over the battlefield, but rather to create a buffer zone for the cloud forts to escape. Vihrogon had clearly been right; also, Alien turned out to be less afraid of the emperor than the prospect of imminent death, after all. If Dallion were to guess, his sudden demise had probably just come as a bonus for the old snake. At least he knew Diroh would be fine, unless she attempted something stupid like flying to try to help him.

Spinning around, Dallion sent out several spark infused line attacks, while simultaneously casting dozens of barriers around him with the aura sword. For the moment, his main goal wasn't to hurt the battle mage, but to get rid of the wyverns in his immediate vicinity. The rest would have to wait for a few minutes longer.

It's still not too late, Tisaku said. The Moonstones for your life.

I thought it was for a chance to join you.

That was the previous offer. There won't be a third.

Dallion gritted his teeth. The remaining aether echo had also met its demise in the face of a ground spell that had burned through it. With the skies clear, the battle mages on the ground had fewer targets to deal with, so they were targeting him as well.

Yet, among the tenseness of the situation, Dallion couldn't help but think that the battle mage was still playing for time. For one thing, he could have done a lot more damage. Based on how destructive he had been during their previous encounter, he was outright tame in comparison.

Why aren't you casting destruction spells at me? He wondered.

You haven't achieved your main goal, Dallion said, a new set of a hundred instances carefully examining the battlefield. The wyverns, the golems, they aren't the main thing.

Trying to be smart?

No, just remembering how you work. Back at the Academy, the shardfly infestation wasn't the goal, it was just the means. You wanted to kill the archmage and as many senior mages as you could. You're doing the same here. Distracting everyone until your real goal is underway.

He darted at his enemy, proceeding with a combination of line strikes and eleven-circle spells. This time, the battle mage was forced to retreat, casting three dozen aether barriers in front of him.

A hero without an army isn't a hero, Tisaku said. You'll die before you find out.

Suddenly, a torrent of green flame flew by. Piercing the layers of wyverns, it hit the ground, striking one of the remaining two battle mages there. The unfortunate man didn't have the time to scream, instantly evaporating as did everyone else within a hundred feet. The new attack hadn't come from a cloud fort or a fury, but from a dragon.

Getting rusty, old man? a familiar voice asked.

There was no doubt about it, despite growing considerably since the last time Dallion had seen him, the dragon was Dark, and mounted on his back was Euryale. Just as importantly, the two hadn't arrived alone.

Chapter 806:

Gorgons mounted on griffins approached from the distance. A large dwarven army was also approaching on the ground. Moments ago, there weren't any of them to be seen. Dallion was more than certain about that. Clearly, the third force in the conflict had its own method of transportation unknown to anyone else.

Close your eyes, Euryale shouted.

Her words had the opposite effect on the nearby wyverns, who looked in her direction only to turn to stone and fall to the ground, hitting it like cinder blocks.

Unlike all the previous times, Dallion didn't, either. The level of his magic trait had made the symbols visible in the gorgons' eyes, symbols which interacted with his own magic threads, sending instructions for them to affect the entity by turning its flesh and bone to stone. However, when it came to magic, there was always an exception. With a bit of will, Dallion forced his magic threads to settle down. It felt remarkably close to suppressing a shiver during a cold day. It wasn't so much about strength of endurance, just knowing the effect and having the mind not to let it affect the body.

Your eyes, he thought. For the first time in his existence, he had managed to see to really see the eyes of a gorgon. The color was indescribable and yet felt so familiar.

Defying Nature

(+5 Perception)

Looking into a gorgon's eyes usually happens once. In your case, it was a bit more, but this is the one that counts. Now you're ready for anything.

A split second later, a new breath of fire shot out, as Dark attacked the enemy battle mage, who also wasn't affected by the gorgon's stare.

Still Wyverns stacked up in front of it as a shield, their petrification only further protecting him from the flame.

Seeing proof that his enemy wasn't invincible, Dallion cast a series of flame shard spells, sending them flying at Tisaku like homing missiles. Each of them was shot down by an appropriate counter spell, although unlike before, the mage pulled back. Even he realized that he didn't stand a chance against a mage and a dragon, not to mention a gorgon.

Why are you here? Dallion asked in one of his instances as he chased after Tisaku with all the rest.

Nice to see you two, the gorgon replied with one of hers. With everything going on, you clearly needed some help.

That wasn't entirely true. Dallion did have a few cards to play, although the current outcome was preferable. With all three armies on the battlefield, the Azures had no way of controlling the vortexes. Even now, the distribution of forces shifted. Half the wyverns and all the golems turned to

clash with the armies of the Stone and Steel Alliance. The rest continued pressuring the imperial cloud forts.

Theyre still taking too few losses, Vihrogon said. Theres no way they would be able to continue towards the imperial capital, or anywhere for that matter, but theyve by no means suffered the blow you needed them to.

The emperor is certain to understand. Adzorg joined in the conversation. A victory is a victory, after all.

Its nothing to do with the emperor. Preventing a defeat isnt a victory.

Then lets have them lose what they came for, Dallion said.

What? One of the dragons instances looked at him.

The wheels in Dallions mind were already turning. There was a time when one would call the action he was about to do reckless. Not any longer, though. Now it was decisivehe knew exactly what was at stake, just as he knew he had all the strength to back it up. For so long he had been a fly flying through the webs of others. This time, he intended on becoming the spider.

Lux, he said openly in the real world. Boost me.

Cyan flames covered his body, propelling him down and forward like a cannonball. Hitting the ground at such speed wasnt going to cause any serious injuries, although it might still sting a bit.

In the blink of the eye, Dallion was on the ground, the enemy battle mage high up above him. And just then, the otherworlder slammed the hard soil with his fist.

REALM CREATION

A green rectangle emerged before him. Yet nothing else changed. At this precise moment, Dallion was simultaneously in a realm and the real world as well. Rather, his realm was part of the real world. The only thing missing were the other living beings.

Name the Land you wish to create.

Finally, creating a world, Dallion thought. He could feel the realm forming around him, like a bubble in the wilderness. It wasnt largeno more than a thousand feet in every direction, but enough to encapsulate his enemy, along with a healthy dozen of wyverns and aether golems. On the positive side, he could feel that Euryale and Dark were also there.

I name it Temp, he said.

You have created the Land of Temp Level 1.

You have full control of the Land of Temp.

A glass colossus has been made the lands guardian.

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny.

A glass colossus? Vihrogon asked, appearing in his dryad form. Of course it had to be something exotic.

Land Creator

(+5 Body)

You have created your first realm domain. Hopefully, youve gathered enough strength. Its all uphill from here.

You have broken through your eighty-first barrier.

You are Level 81

Choose the trait you value the most.

When it rains, it pours, Dallion thought.

Once again, one seemingly simple action had granted him so much. Without hesitation, Dallion chose to boost his empathy trait by one.

Owner, a new voice said respectfully in his head.

That glass colossus had emerged directly in Dallions personal realm. While the familiars were somewhat startled, the notion wasnt as unnatural to Dallion as one might think. He could feel the new realm linked to his own, as if it were part of it. That was what gave nobles their power and explained the mystery of them being all knowing. It was true that Dallion could feel the entities within it, as long as he really concentrated. That had more to do with his magic trait.

Despite what the Moons had claimed, nobles werent omnipotent, they were just linked to their domain, which meant that they could learn most things that happened within it as long as they put in the effort. Given enough true time, an awakened could visit every area guardian within his domain and force them to provide all sorts of information. That would be a waste of time, especially since the task could be delegated to key guardians or in the case of major cities to overseers.

How do I create limiting echoes? Dallion asked.

Using that trick already? Vihrogon shook his head.

I just want to know. I wont use it. Yet in the back of his mind, a voice said that he might have to.

You just put them there. Your realms are your realms, and the real-world domain is nothing but a massive realm. It mostly works on the non-awakened. Anyone stronger can treat it as a realm invasion and get rid of the echo.

I had an echo without my realm being invaded, Dallion countered.

Every awakened was a non-awakened, the dryad said in a bitter tone. Its all a matter of patience. Try it if you want. Even if the battle mage is flying, youre the owner of this domain, which means you also control the air.

The suggestion was frightening with its implications. If the average awakened knew they wouldnt set foot in another settlement ever again. Probably that was precisely why nobles didnt resort to

such extremes, even in dire situations. Similar to what Tisaku had said, a noble without anyone to follow him was nothing but a standard awakened.

I have something else in mind. Dallion returned to the real world.

Wyverns and golems came into existence, along with the battle mage, who was still attempting an escape. If it were anyone else, Dallion would have felt pity for him. Unlike Nerosal, or all the other cities in the world, this was a completely uninhabited settlement, so there wasn't any point in him being gentle.

Temp guardian, Dallion said. The moment he did, he regretted his original naming choice. I challenge you.

The entity rose up from the ground. Similar to its name, it had the appearance of a faceless marionette made of transparent bluea living placeholder to take on the role of key area guardian. This was its first time in the real world, pulled out from the realm thanks to Dallion's awakened ability. And just as it had emerged, it was destroyed by a shattering point attack in the chest.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

TEMP Level increased

The VILLAGE has been improved to Level 2.

Your Awakened Level has increased to 82.

Choose the trait you value the most.

Shards of glass filled the air, quickly fading away. At the same time, the diameter of the domain area doubled.

Without hesitation, Dallion repeated the process. This time, a stronger version of the colossus emerged, standing twelve feet tall. The results, though, were the same. Having spent years fighting item guardians to improve his skills back when he was part of the Icepicker guild, Dallion had gotten rather efficient at it. And while it had taken a series of five point attacks half of them probably unnecessary the guardian wasn't able to put up any resistance.

The domain doubled once more.

A sensation of strength and power rushed through Dallion, urging him to continue. Overconfidence tried to latch on, whispering that he could easily take on if not Emperor Tamin, then at least the former Countess Priscord. The notion was quickly cast off. The only person Dallion wanted to crush right now was the battle mage and, in a way, to send a clear message to Grym and all the other nobles watching. In the awakened world, a nobles debut was more important than anything else, and he intended to give them something to talk about.

TEMP Level increased

The VILLAGE has been improved to Level 4.

Your Awakened Level has increased to 84.

Choose the trait you value the most.

A new glass colossus emerged, now over fifty feet high, ripping the ground as it did. Its size was imposing enough to cause any golems and wyverns nearby to see it as a threat. Some even attempted to chip away at it, only succeeding in getting themselves squished. Even Dark was tempted to engage, forcing Dallion to use a bit of force splitting to prevent the eager dragon from destroying the guardian.

Last one, the otherworlder said, letting out a barrage of point attacks and ten circle spells.

The size of the domain had grown to the point that it was impossible not to notice, even from the cloud forts.

Shards of glass the size of houses fell off the guardian as Dallion kept on pummeling it with everything at his disposal. As before, victory came a few seconds later, boosting the nobles level to eighty-five. There were no new achievement rectangles, nor any indication that the settlement was close to turning into a town. Then again, that wasnt Dallions goal.

Come again, he ordered, pulling the colossus into reality.

The colossus did.

Grab him.

With reflexes rivaling those of his owner, the colossus reached up, his massive fist closing around the unsuspecting battle mage. Just to be on the safe side, Dallion cast a series of aether spheres around the guardians fist.

Like to see you get out of that, he thought.

Not bad, Vihrogon said, walking up to Dallion. Just one thing, though. Roots shot up from the ground, entangling all golems in the area. The roots themselves werent enough to keep the constructs down for long, but no matter how many times the golems ripped them off, new ones would emerge. Never ignore the small fries. In large amounts, everything counts.

Ill keep that in mind, Dallion said. Lux, get me to him. He turned in the direction of the captured battle mage.

Chapter 807: Reunion of Illusion

Youre a noble. Mage Tisakus voice trembled.

It wasnt the colossus that had him scared, nor Euryales forces joining the battle area. What terrified him was the impossibility that he had just witnessed.

A mage cant become a noble.

An aether sphere surrounded him, pushing back against the colossus grip and Dallions spells beyond that. Had the settlement remained at level one, that would have been enough to shatter the guardians entire body, let alone its hand. After improving to level five, though, the entity had become as solid as steel and as hard as diamond.

Theres no way, the mage hissed through his teeth.

Whys he acting so differently? Dallion asked in his realm.

Because hes faced with an impossibility, Vihrogon explained. Theres never been a case of a mage becoming a noble.

Ive seen nobles that can do magic, Dallion countered.

Its the other way around. While rare, nobles are sometimes granted a new trait upon passing the eightieth level gate. The Purple Moon is always picky, so its not as often as one might think, but there always are a few cases. Being born with magic, on the other hand, seals an awakened's fate. They can become the greatest awakened that ever was, but never a true noble. And still here you are.

Indeed, here Dallion was. In less than a minute, he had gained five levels and fifteen trait points without even trying. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. The fact alone that he had joined the ranks of the domain rulers had made people instantly react. In Tisakus case, Dallion could feel the fear emanating from within innate fear that was in the heart of every awakened since birth.

No wonder nobles and hunters didnt mix. Due to their way of life, hunters were partially immune to this, which made them a nuisance in the eyes of domain rulers.

And yet I have, Dallion added the subtlest note of fear in his words. If he wanted, he could have even attempted to use that to invade the mages personal realm, but chose not to. The empire has one, this one. Youve lost.

You think just because youve got me that youve won? A sudden bout of calm came over the mage. The Azure Federation already has what it came for. The empire has already fallen.

Dallion split into instances, looking around. Despite the unexpected reinforcements, more and more golems and wyverns kept on appearing even as the vortex towers had started disappearing. It was a single moment of distraction, but Tisaku took advantage of it.

A ray of flame erupted, melting through the glass colossus hand, shattering all of Dallions aether spheres. At such a proximity the spell was strong enough to scorch part of the mage himself, but it also let him break free.

Damn it! Dallion quickly waved his aura sword, casting a new series of combat spells, but the initiative was gone. The glass colossus also attempted to grab Tisaku once more, yet was met with another destructive flame spell shattering his other hand.

Ill get him! Dark shouted, flying in the mages direction.

Dark! Dallion shouted. You and Eury hold back!

But the dragon attempted to protest, but was quickly interrupted by the gorgon on his back.

Its his fight, Euryale said. Are you sure you can handle it, Dal?

Yes.

Both nobles could feel the determination of the other. Dallion knew that she had the same abilities as him, and probably a higher awakened level. On the other hand, he had the ability to cast spells.

Ill deal with things on my part of the battlefield, the gorgon said. Lets talk when its over.

Id like that. Dallion nodded.

With a snort Dark did a flip in the air, flying back to the spot where the dwarven forces were clashing with the Azures.

They grow up so fast, dont they, dear boy? Adzorg asked from Dallions personal realm. Reminds me of you in a way.

Another blast filled the air, accompanied by the shattering of glass. The colossus was having serious issues. Even in a weakened state, Tisaku proved to be quite capable. Now that the initial shock had worn off, the battle mage was almost back to peak combat efficiency.

Time to end this, Dallion whispered. His aura sword moved about, casting a series of spells. None of them were particularly difficult; in fact, he had learned them back when he was just a novice in the Learning Hall. At the moment, though, they were the greatest weapon he had to resolve the situation.

Eight spells flew to the ground, creating an octagonal pattern. They were shortly followed by twenty-four more.

Argus! Dallion shouted. Clever to use the vortex fields to fuel your army. A pity that my side didnt consider that. Now its over, though. A giant portal formed between the individual spell dots beneath. Say goodbye to your advantage.

One thing that the otherworlder had learned while chasing after Adzorg was exactly how the timepiece functioned. Its main role was never to create vortexes, but weaken the barrier between worlds and realms. Vortexes could be described as a symptom that one could benefit from. However, if someone wanted to really be creative, they could do what the void had done in its attempt to find Dallion: Open a portal to the banished realm.

At first, nothing happened. The giant portal kept on shimmering on the ground as if it were a very expensive special effect. Then an arm emerged. Far larger than anything else on the battlefield, it grabbed hold of the ground around the portal, as if it were reaching out of a well. Then, a head the size of a mountain pear peered out.

The Moons had warned that breaking their rules would come with consequences, but right now Dallion wasnt breaking any such laws. The spell that he had cast merely took advantage of the weakened state of the world realm.

The sheer force of the ancient colossus returning to the world shook the entire battlefield, causing dozens of vortexes to fade out. More importantly, it eliminated the Azure mages that were syphoning their magic.

REALM DESTROYED

A red rectangle emerged in front of Dallion. Clearly, his domain had proven incapable of withstanding the arrival of a new colossus.

Easy come, easy go, Dallion thought. At least my level didnt drop.

Vihrogon also disappeared, reverting to his armadil shield form. With Dallions realm no longer in the real world, he had been reduced to an item guardian once more.

Lux, Dallion whispered. Take me to the brightest spot

Once again, he was propelled through the air with such speed it seemed as if he were teleporting.

Purple lightning cracked through the sky, striking more wyverns. One of the remaining battle mages was doing everything in his power to foil Dallion, especially now that he had seen what the otherworlder was capable of. The spell was followed by a second that cast fire lightning on the wyverns in question, having them act like living torches intent on destroying their target. Unfortunately for them, Dallions second weapon was more than capable of producing enough water to extinguish the threat in its infancy.

How did you become so strong?! Tisaku shouted from the other side of the battlefield. The battle mage was experienced enough to know when a fight was lost. That by no means meant he liked it. You were a nobody! An upstart with aspirations of grandeur that only got where you did because of the people around you.

Dallion smiled. There was no denying that. Early on, others had fought his battles. He had only been there to provide the final push in the appropriate direction. Even until recently, his victories were thanks to those fighting for him. Now, he could call on entities to fight for him, but ultimately, it was him leading the battle and everyone knew it.

Things change. Dallion cast a two-circle spell, levitating a piece of rock from the ground. He then added several magic symbols to vastly increase his speed and threw it in the direction of the battle mage. From this distance, it was impossible to achieve a hit, but it served more than enough for a warning. Whatever you did here, whatever you attempted to do, its over. Ive made sure of that, just as Ill make sure to let everyone know what will happen if you use vortexes to boost your army ever again.

Thats overdramatic, Vihrogon said. Considering that youve got the attention of your old flame and your new crush on you, I fully approve.

You never change, do you? Dallion shook his head.

Things change. Those we serve along with them.

Drops of water flew off the harpsisword in repetitive fashion, drilling through any wyverns that approached Dallion even remotely. Harp had been quiet during the entire battle, but that didnt mean she had neglected her duties.

With the risk of ruining the mood, I think you should go after him, dear boy, Adzorg said. Even shaken, hes a dangerous opponent, not to mention that hes one of the few who actually knows what the Azures plans actually are.

I will. Dallion waved his aura sword, casting another series of portal spells. Just as soon as I make my point.

A new large portal was made, bringing a second colossus into the world. No matter what happened from here on, this place would remain in legends as the place where armies clashed against giants

just like Ogres Gorge. At this point, there was little doubt that a similar battle had taken place there. It had to have been before the Tamin empire, possibly a lot further. Maybe Pan knew something on the matter, maybe not. Now that Dallion was a noble, he could finally have a real conversation with the copyette. In the meantime, he would finish what he had started.

Propelling himself to a new spot above the battlefield, Dallion cast a portal to call yet another colossus. More than two-thirds of the vortexes had faded away; some had done their job, preventing the void from seeping into the world, others had been absorbed by colossus or Azure mages.

One last time, Lux, Dallion said. Pick a good spot.

Four colossi? Isn't that a bit overkill, dear boy? Adzorg remarked. Aren't three of them enough?

Dallion just smiled and cast another portal spell. That one was significantly smaller than all the previous ones, yet it was a lot more special. As the portal formed, everyone on the ground instinctively ran away, fearing what would follow. Dallion did the opposite, landing down a few steps from it.

Your turn, little guy, Dallion said, bringing Ruby out of his personal realm. Have fun.

The shardfly flicked its wings, then darted into the portal. An aether golem, more daring than all the rest, charged at Dallion in an attempt to take advantage of the situation. Before it could reach him, Nox popped out into the real world, slicing it to shreds with one strike.

Weak, the crackling puma said, eyes covering its entire body.

Probably didn't get enough magic. Dallion petted his familiar. Or maybe you've grown a bit stronger.

The creature purred, then walked by Dallion, rubbing its massive body against him. At the end of the day, it remained nothing more than a big cat.

In the air, the cloud forts started moving in again. With the key elements of the Azure army gone, they could afford to go on the offensive. Lightning and aether shards were raining down, eliminating enemies inch by inch. There was no doubt about it, the fight was already won. Now, it was all a matter of mopping up what was left until the fighting stopped.

Suddenly, a cyan light emerged from the nearby portal. Ethereal wings stretched out, as thin as a soap bubble. It was said that beauty was subjective, and in many cases, it was. At the same time, there was a concept of objective brilliancethe one thing hardwired in everyone's mind of a world, making them regard something as admiration itself. And in this case, such a creature had just appeared.

Took you long enough. An eight-winged butterfly made entirely of light emerged from the portal. Large enough to be the mainsail of a giant ship, she flapped her wings, dispersing specks of glittering dust. At least you kept your promise.

I usually try to, Gleam. Dallion smiled.

Just above the massive shardfly, Ruby fluttered about, making every attempt to stretch his size as much as possible. It was comical in a very endearing way.

Ready to come back home? Dallion asked.

Maybe. If you make something suitable for me.

I will. Until then, fancy going on a hunt?

Gleam flapped half of her wings.

Thought you'd never ask.

Chapter 808: Mage Sacrifice

I should have stayed longer, Dallion thought.

From a personal point of view, he'd love nothing better than finally getting to spend some quality time with Euryale. With the void gone, he missed her more than ever. As a noble, on the other hand, he knew he had to keep his distance for the sake of appearances. It was never simple when nobles of different countries had relationships, even when they were allies. At the present state of world chaos, having a fiancée from the Stone and Steel Alliance would put him under suspicion. Not that it made things impossible, he would just have to be a lot more careful about it.

Do you think I should come back in a few weeks? Dallion asked as Lux propelled him forward.

Thanks to a combination of spells, the effects of acceleration were barely noticeable even at his current speed. It also helped that he had cast a few barriers in front of him as well. Even with dozens of instances and his reaction speed, the last thing he wanted was to have something crash into him.

There's no point, dear boy. Even if you get there days in advance, you'll find that the Imperial House and the Order have beaten you to it. Back in my day, I'd say that the Academy would be present as well, but with everything that had passed, I doubt the emperor would risk them getting too much magic.

Doesn't hurt to check.

Good to see you haven't changed, Gleam said from Dallion's shoulder. After her return to the real world, the familiar had used illusion to reduce her size to that of a standard butterfly. Ruby had as well, although in this case, a lot less effort was required. Setting a colossus or two free, then rushing off to chase after something else.

It'll be fine, Dallion smirked.

On the positive side, though, apart from the Azures, the colossi would also keep Alien in check for a while, likely Euryale's side as well. That was another reason why Dallion had quickly left. One might joke that being a noble had made him leave others to deal with the consequences of his actions, but the actual reason was to grant himself the time. By now, what had been celebrated as a clever means to turn the tides of the battle was probably cursed as a cure that was worse than the disease.

Eury and Dark will handle things. Dallion concentrated on tracking Tisaku.

While the battle mage had taken every precaution against being tracked: echoes keeping an eye on all item guardians he had with him, spells that would conceal any magic threads, and whatnot, there was one thing that remained out of his control: the flora and fauna of the wilderness.

With the current level of Dallions empathy trait, he could sense plants and animals for dozens of miles. More importantly, he could also combine scholarly and spellcraft skills to communicate with them from a distance. As such, he had been given a reliable account as to the general direction the battle mage was headed.

I think you should pick up the pace, dear boy, Adzorg suggested. You wont be able to do anything if he gets to any of the Azure cities.

Hes not going to a city, Dallion said. One of the things he had memorized in the command room was the locations of all major towns and cities in the area. With the level eighty cap removed, Dallions mind stat had jumped past ninety, allowing him near flawless recollection.

The path that Tisaku was retreating on was directly southwest, almost without deviation. None of the federation capitals were there. There always was the possibility that a new city had been erected, but the fact that the mage had deliberately ignored a few border towns in relative vicinity posed questions. The only thing of any significance was the western ocean.

Harp, think they might have found another nymph city?

There are no nymph cities, the harpsisword guardian replied. Only ruins.

The one we found before seemed in good shape.

Technically, Dallion hadnt seen it with his own eyes. Back then, he and Eury were helping Jiroh explore her home cloud citadel, leaving the underwater ruins to the other hunters of the group. From what they had said, the ruins were well preserved, if mostly empty. That hadnt kept them from gathering enough valuable artifacts to retire should they ever choose to.

Is he heading towards one? Dallion persisted.

Hes going to where one had been, Harp admitted.

With all the nymph spells and techniques the Azures used, Dallion suspected them having found a good haul of ancient artifacts. With the majority of the countries of the federation being on the ocean coast, they might well have been building up their arsenal of knowledge and equipment for decades, if not more.

Tell Lux how to get me there, Dallion ordered. Gleam, get ready for a real fight.

More real than where were coming from? The spectral shardfly laughed. Nice to see youre starting to appreciate me.

Dallion didnt respond. It was tempting to say that he always did, but that wouldnt be the truth. More often, he had focused on Lux and Nox, and there had been times when he had appreciated no one at all. As much as the void within him could be used as an excuse, it didnt change the facts, nor did it completely erase the guilt.

Once were done with this, Im going solo for a bit, Gleam said. Theres something I need to take care of back south,

Gleam, youve got nothing to prove.

I know. I just want to have the fun to slice him up for a change. Waves of viciousness emanated from the creature. I promise not to kill him, just cripple him enough, so he'll have to spend the rest of his life hiding from anything that moves.

It was clear that changing her mind would be impossible. After all, all the fallen south was the place where Gleam had died at the wings of another spectral shardfly. Now that she had returned, and at peak strength, she wanted to settle the score.

Just be careful, alright? He might not be the only danger lurking there.

Don't worry about it.

The strength of Lux's thrust increased. For a few seconds Dallion felt as if he were on a rocket ship, as the landscape all around him changed. Even the world's aether bubble darkened, making the void clearer to see.

There was no way to tell what the exact speed was. It was far from the speed of light, but likely a lot more than that of sound. Using his aura sword, Dallion cast a few more layers of protection, just in case.

A few minutes later, the acceleration suddenly stopped. The ocean had become visible in the distance, though that wasn't the reason the firebird had come to a halt. A wall of aether barriers were floating in the air, glowing in their typical semi-transparent purple. What was more, the Azure battle mage was floating on the other side of them.

You just won't let go, he said. Anger and fear could clearly be felt in his voice, even for those that didn't have music skills. Yet, there was also a tenseness and determination that emanated from the person himself. I told you that you're a step behind. Catching up to me hasn't changed that.

You're lying, Dallion said in his newfound confidence of a noble.

Is that so, my Lord? The mage mocked. Then I guess you'll have no problem finishing me off on your own?

Before Dallion could even respond, Gleam flapped all four sets of wings, sending a torrent of slashes at the wall. Magic hit with magic, slashing the solid surfaces to bits. It was like watching shards of fast melting glass crumble in the air, leaving nothing behind.

Sorry about that, Dallion said with an amused smile. One of my companions got overly eager.

The battle mage remained silent.

Are you sure you want to fight? the noble asked. You're wounded and exhausted. Even your magic has become irregular. What was that you used to tell me at the Academy? Irregular magic doubles the chances of spells fizzling off?

Collapsing, Tisaku corrected.

You would know. Or are you considering using your Moonstone?

Use a Moonstone for this? Don't be absurd. His fingers moved, casting two seven-circle spells.

Dallion burst into instances, expecting an attack of some sort. Instead, the spells merely created a set of aether armor around the man's body. Some of the elements looked vaguely familiar, but on the

whole, the design remained unknown. If Dallion were to guess, he'd say that it was an attempt at recreating nymph armor.

Surrender and I'll guarantee your life, Dallion said in each instance. You know I'm good for it.

As a mage and noble, you probably are. But as I told you, you're already too late.

The aether armor became brighter, forcing Dallion to narrow his eyes a fraction. He could see the spells magic merging with the mages own, causing it to circulate throughout his body like a thunderbolt. A new sudden burst of light followed, increasing the intensity even more.

Careful! Adzorg warned, even if there was no need to. It didn't take much for Dallion to recognize the incandescent glow of the Purple Moonstone, not just one, but three of them. In less than a second, the nearly defeated mage had transformed into possibly the most magic entity Dallion had ever seen. There was no way to tell whether the effects of multiple Moonstones stacked up, but at the very least, they would transform him into the magic embodiment of a Moon for a limited amount of time.

All one hundred of Dallion's instances scattered throughout the sky, each casting a new set of spells. Meanwhile, so did Tisakua double sphere spell, so complex and intricate that it made anything but Adzorg's castings look like a joke.

Nymph magic, Dallion thought. But was it?

While the spell itself was unfamiliar, all the symbols were clearly based on human magic. Thousands of them Dallion knew well enough to say exactly what they did. Only a few dozen he'd have to check later, but could still recreate them with ease.

A massive beam of purple light shot out from the aether armor, but instead of aiming towards Dallion, it flew in the opposite direction right into the ocean.

You focused on the battle, mistaking it for the war. It's not even close. Everyone and everything so far is expendable.

Crap! Dallion thrust forward with half of his instances. Although he still couldn't determine the exact purpose of the spell, he could see what it was doing to the caster. All the magic within the battle mages body, Moonstones included, was siphoned away, giving strength to the beam.

Gleam, cut the beam! Dallion shouted.

A wind slash more powerful than a line attack split the air, striking the beam. The moment it did so, though, the attack crumbled as if were a line of ash hiding in a marble column.

Unwilling to concede failure, Dallion flew up to Tisaku, performing a spark infused point attack at the mans head from point blank range.

White energy shone within the harpsisword, combining with water to create the most powerful attack Dallion was capable of.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 1000%

A purple rectangle emerged in front of him as the force of the attack pierced the aether helmet along with the mages head. Sadly, that did nothing to disrupt the spell. The flow of magic kept on exiting what was left of the mages body, as if nothing had happened.

Dallion only had enough time for a split-second decision: pull back and let the spell run its course, or actively engage and attempt to weaken its effect if nothing else. In typical fashion, he chose the latter, letting go of his harpsisword and reaching into the hole created by his attack.

This is going to hurt, he thought.

Taking advantage of the only unarmored spot in his formerly living enemy, Dallion reached out with his internal magic threads in an attempt to consume what was left.

The magic flow hit him like a bolt of lightning, but Dallion refused to move away.

Just like a vortex, he hissed through gritted teeth. Two sets of healing symbols covered his bodycourtesy of Gleam and Harpwhile Lux enveloped him in blue flames to strengthen the effect.

There were times when such a degree of healing would have been enough against any enemy. Right now, it was barely sufficient, restoring Dallions right arm almost as fast as the absorption was charring it. The pain was so great that Dallion couldnt move, let alone cast another spell with his free arm. The grip of his left hand loosened, causing the aura sword to slip out.

Dont be a fool, Adzorg shouted. You wont be able to absorb that much!

Whats another eighty magic? Dallion tried to say, his face twisting in pain despite his efforts.

Gleam, cut his hand off! The echo insisted.

No! Dallion hissed. As painful as the sensation was, he could feel its intensity decreasing. If he wanted to decrease the efficiency of the spell, he had to work faster.

Doubling his effort, he kept pulling the magic threads into himself when suddenly the entire mage tore into two with a snap.

You have assimilated part of ARGUS TISAKUs magic, increasing your magic trait to 103.

Chapter 809: The Emperor's Responce

A pillar of water erupted as the beam struck the ocean. Still too weak to do anything, Dallion could only watch as the spell took effect. The magic threads of that spot of the world twisted, forming the jagged lines of an opening.

Nymph magic, Dallion whispered.

The spell reminded him of the one Harp had taught him. The execution was completely different, but the effects were eerily similar.

More waves formed, bursting up from the ocean surface, but instead of splashing back down, they changed form. The peaks formed towers hundreds of feet high, solidifying into place. More followed, each one creating dozens of buildings at a time. Layer by layer, an entire city formed before Dallions eyes. And it wasnt empty. Even from this distance, Dallion was able to see dozens

of inhabitants moving about the hardened water. However, they weren't humans or any other of the free races; all of them were nymphs.

Harp? Dallion asked.

The healing spells had won the battle, healing twice as much as the new surge of magic was burning up, but it would be minutes before he was in a state fit for battle.

Retreat, Vihrogon said. You've got no chance against them.

They have magic, Dallion said. All of them.

It wasn't anywhere near his level. In Academy terms, most of the nymphs ranged from top novices to adequate apprentices. The issue was that as much as he tried, he couldn't see a single one without magic.

Was that what Tisaku meant when he said that Dallion was one step behind all along? The Azures entire plan had been to return the nymphs from banishment all along. That's why they needed the Moonstones, that's the real reason they siphoned off magic from the vortexes. The wyverns and golems probably were their attempt to build up an army fast, but the real goal had been the spell that the battle mage had sacrificed himself to cast.

Harp?

Listen to him, the nymph guardian said. I cannot protect you.

Harp couldn't protect him? This was the first time she'd ever said that. There had been cases in which she had chosen not to, cases in which she intervened even when she shouldn't have, but she'd never felt the fear that was resonating throughout her entire being just now.

Lux, get ready to take me away, he ordered. Gleam, what do you make of that?

Trouble, the shardfly replied. Lots of trouble.

You saw them in the banished realm?

The banished realm isn't like that. It's Gleam stopped. Some restrictions remained, not to mention she wasn't a noble.

Dallion moved the fingers of his left hand, casting a spell to summon the aura blade. The weapon swiftly flew up into his grasp. Even it wasn't enough to win him a fight against an entire nymph city. The few members of the race Dallion had fought in his realm, or while improving items, were anywhere from tough to impossible to defeat. Magic alone wasn't enough to defeat them, regardless of whether Vihrogon and all other inhabitants of Dallion's realm helped him or not. No doubt the majority of the reappeared nymphs were weaker, but there would be more than a few who weren't.

As the waves came to a standstill, the magnificence of the city of water couldn't be contested. Only the imperial palace was superior.

Determined to see what he was facing, Dallion split into instances. In a hundred of them, he gave Lux the order to propel him forward to the enemy, while the remaining fifty spread out, ready to retreat at any moment.

It took a second for the instances to reach the outer wall. The moment they did, massive spikes emerged from the watery surface, aimed at any intruder.

So, that's your defense mechanism, Dallion thought. It would have been impressive if he hadn't already seen something similar within the tower vortexes.

Eager to make the most of it, Dallion's instances waved the aura sword, casting a variety of combat spells to see the enemies' reaction. Surprisingly, all of them were successful. The water material that the city was made of quickly shrugged off any damage, but a few nymphs were wounded.

They're not used to human magic, Dallion thought. That was an unexpected advantage that only made his decision more difficult. Leaving would ensure his survival, but I would also provide the nymphs enough time to get used to the present era.

Harp, are you sure you can't stop them? Dallion asked.

There was no response.

In that case, I'll have to.

Time passed slowly. Every few seconds more and more nymphs gathered at the walls facing Dallion. All of them were in combat gear, even if not as impressive as Harp's. Apparently, there was one thing that they were aware of: that there was a war going on, and that not all humans were on their side.

How many do you think there are? Dallion asked. The healing spells were doing their job well. A little more and he could almost say he'd returned to peak condition.

A few hundred, probably a few thousand, Vihrogon replied. There was a calm tenseness in his voice. Only awakened can be brought back from the banished realm.

A few thousand. We've dealt with more before.

Yeah, right.

Time to combine music and magic, Dallion thought. Maybe attack as well.

Before that, though, there was something else he intended to do.

Where's your noble? he shouted, using the nymph language.

The question created some commotion among the nymphs, as he expected it to. Unfortunately, no individual nymphs drew attention to themselves. Looking carefully, Dallion was able to spot a few level sixty specimens, but not a single noble. Maybe the partial absorption of the battle mage had an effect? A lot of the small fries had been summoned, but no one really powerful.

Here goes, Dallion started casting Tisakus beam of destruction.

The spell formed within seconds, releasing a beam of fiery energy at the water city before any of the nymphs could react. Vapor burst in all directions. A hole drilled through walls and buildings as the spell pierced the city, hitting the water of the ocean behind.

This was supposed to be a moment of victory, but Dallion felt something was not right. Not only was there no fear and anger coming from the nymphs, but as far as he could tell, there didn't seem to be any casualties, either.

You can't damage water, Harp said. Even with that much strength.

That wasn't what Dallion wanted to hear. He knew from his battle against the Star that liquids had no firm shape, but he had hoped that the destructive power of the spell would be enough to make the city pop like a cloud fort.

That was weak, Gleam said, fluttering her wings.

Instantly, Dallion disappeared. In her current form, the shardfly's illusions had become a lot more potent. As far as reality itself was concerned, there was nothing but air where the otherworlder had been. If nothing else, this ensured that he couldn't be attacked.

Any chance you could use some illusion on them?

No, the creature replied without hesitation. You're only seeing part of what's there?

There's an illusion?

As if guessing his question, the sea surrounding the city of water shimmered. Clusters of walled buildings emerged from nothing, like popcorn in a can. What was one single nymph city turned into a dozen, then two. It was as if an entire country had risen from the ocean or in this case, removed its veil of illusion. The thousands of enemies that Dallion was facing just moments ago now turned into hundreds of thousands and they weren't just mid-level awakened anymore.

A tall nymph, clad in water armor, more intricate than what Harp's had been, rose into the air. There was no question that he was a mage, but a lot stronger than the common variety Dallion had seen. As a rule, most mages stopped their development at twenty. Some pushed on, acquiring a few levels more, but never much. In this case, the nymph was well in his sixties, and his magic level was almost that of Dallion.

Our nobles have no time to deal with pests like you, he said, confidence emanating from him like a beacon. I see you haven't made the pledge.

The pledge? Dallion asked within his realm.

That's news to me too, dear boy, Adzorg admitted. I would assume that the Azures have made some deal to brand themselves allies to the nymphs, or vice versa.

Nymph items, nymph tactics, nymph magic, now nymph warriors. Of course, the federation would be so confident. Come to think of it, it was likely that the archdukes and Emperor Tamin had suspected something of the sort. For all the snobbish talk, the number of forces that had been sent was quite conservative and never accompanied by a noble of substantial importance.

You used us to tip their hand, Dallion said beneath his breath. The emperor didnt need someone to win his war, just someone with the ability to poke the Federation enough to see what would happen. Euryales superiors, whoever they were, probably had the same idea when they had sent her with Dark.

What pledge is that? Dallion asked, casting a series of aether bubbles around him.

Ah, an enemy. The nymph smiled. I was itching for a warm up after all this time. I hope you prove more resourceful than you have so far. It would make things boring.

Thats why I told you to run away, Vihrogon said with a sigh. Everyone underestimates nymphs. Even the copyettes didnt manage to wipe them out during their attempt to take over the world.

Every fiber in Dallions body told him to order Lux to fly him out of here. He had no chance against hundreds of thousands he wasnt even sure he had a chance against the single nymph mage that had challenged him. The opponent had seen through Gleams illusion with ease and didnt seem in the least impressed by Dallions battle spell.

Standing his ground, Dallion reached out to any item guardian in the vicinity, but all of the nymphs clothes and gear were made entirely out of water.

I think I can take him, the otherworlder said. The level of his magic trait let him see a few minuscule flaws in the flow of the nymphs magic. It wasnt a lot, but with a bit of luck and a lot of effort, there was a chance that he could exploit them. Then, after the mage was down, maybe the rest would

A large purple sphere appeared in the sky. Made entirely of crystal, it gleamed for several seconds, before thousands of minuscule magic threads emerged from its surface.

Without hesitation, both Dallion and the nymph mage flew back.

Hundreds of magic symbols formed, flashing all over the sphere, like a disco ball. Then, a giant image of the Tamin emperor emerged above it.

Hologram projection? Dallion uttered the first thing that came to mind.

Subjects of the Tamin Empire, the emperors voice boomed. Inhabitants of the world. You have heard rumors of our war with the Azure Federation. Some of you might have been affected, some of you might even have whispered that the empire has reached its final days. To all that have, you are forgiven.

Wow. Thats generous, Gleam said, although Dallion could sense that even she was impressed with the display.

Our armies were successful in pushing our enemies back, which is when the Federation resorted to the most vile of practices, the projection continued. In their desperation, they broke the most significant law of the Moons, bringing back a race that has been banished for millennia. It thus falls on us as your emperor, to prove to them, you, and all that such actions will not be tolerated!

MASS COMBAT INITIATED

A red rectangle appeared in front of Dallion. It wasnt the only one. Thousands more were visible throughout the nymph city, as if everyone had been pulled back into an awakening realm.

The empire has ruled for centuries and the empire will rule for centuries more!

Purple lines formed in the eastern part of the sky, quickly moving west. Spotting them with one of his instances, Dallion focused. The moment he did, his very being was shaken to its core.

Rockets, he thought, incapable of uttering the world.

Ages ago, back when Dallion had faced his first chainling, Cleric had mentioned that only the imperial family and the Order knew the secret of rockets. At the time, Dallion thought that the man was referencing some kind of advanced firecrackers. How wrong he could be.

Hundreds of missiles, hundreds of feet long, were splitting the air, aimed at what seemed to be the entire seacoast. If they were as powerful as Dallion feared, they would be enough not only to wipe the water cities off the map, but several Azure kingdoms along with them.

Our power is great, the projection proclaimed. Our justice is swift, and our enemies shall feel the wrath of a thousand suns upon them.

Lux, get us out of here! Dallin ordered.

Less than half a minute later, purple dawn became visible on the west horizon.

Chapter 810: Glass Fields Victory

Tamin Emperors had always been described as decisive in all available historical sources. In the past, Dallion had believed it to be highly embellished, and a way for the scholars to gain the rulers favor. Now, he found that if anything, the accounts didnt do the people justice.

The weapons alone were enough to make the man the single dominant person in the world, more feared than the Order of the Seven Moons or any other empire past or present. There had been hints of such weapons in the fallen south, but not once had Dallion expected for there to be anything functional and not in such numbers.

It had taken weeks of preparation and a full day of vicious fighting of two massive armies to stop the progress of the Azures at the vortex fields. And yet, the emperor had glassed a massive chunk of the coast within minutes. Over twenty cities and hundreds of smaller towns and villages were no more, the very soil they used to be on transformed into glass. It was the Glass Mounts all over again. And the most scary part of all, the emperor had made sure that virtually all of his subjects knew of the event in real time. The projection artifacts had made sure to display the image in all its horror, only to be met with cheers by everyone in the emperors domain. The masses were glad about the victory; Dallion not so much. He could see the limiting echoes in play everywhere, replacing the horror with joy.

From this perspective, Aliens fear was well founded. If Dallion had failed to achieve a victory at the vortex fields, another target would have been added to the emperors list, destroying everyone there as a result.

Is it over? Diroh asked.

Dallion glanced at her with an instance. After fleeing one of the sites of destruction, he had returned to the archmages cloud fort, spending most of his time looking at the west.

Is it? the dryad pressed on.

It would be easy to say that it had, that the emperors attack had obliterated the entire Azure federation to its core. In a way that was true, but deep inside, he felt that there was more to it. The cluster of nymph cities that had been destroyed the one that Tisaku had sacrificed his life to summon from the banished realm didn't have any nobles in them. It was always possible that in the heat of the moment, the battle mage had messed up the spell, allowing him only to summon simple awakened, but something in the nymphs words made Dallion doubt that.

Lets hope so, he said. Were you able to learn much?

Yeah. I learned a whole lot of things not to do, Diroh said with a spark of her former snark. As she spoke, Skye floated around her in pure cloud form. Glad Im not taking over from you. Its like herding cats.

Herding cats isnt that hard. Dallion kept looking at the horizon. Despite all the new glass far away, there was no telling whether this was just an overture. For the moment, though, he had other issues to deal with.

Although vastly overshadowed by the following events, his appearance on the stage of nobles had been noticed. Alien was the first to begrudgingly acknowledge it, addressing Dallion as baron upon his return the lowest noble title.

Anyone possessing even a faint music skill could sense the anger and bitterness emanating from the archmage. His carefully crafted plan to get rid of Dallion, whatever that plan was, had gone up in flames. Even an archmage couldn't hurt a domain ruler without consequences, and if there was one thing that Dallion had learned, it was that Alien was a coward. The remaining two members of the shimmering circle didn't seem to care. Katka saw it more as annoyance, envious that he had stolen her chance of obtaining the spotlight, and the third mysterious member hadn't even shown up to congratulate him.

The presence of a noble was also felt in the fleet of cloud forts. While Dallions behavior hadn't particularly changed, everyone treated him differently. Lesser mages and furies stopped addressing him, leaving only the higher-ranking ones to do so. The crimson furies started treating him with a bit of respect, which was almost as shocking as the emperors weapons. Not least of all, a cadre of white-haired furies constantly followed him about, ready to assist him in any way. At even the faintest sign that he could use some food or drink, a fury would appear, bringing it on a sea iron platter.

No wonder the general back in Nerosal always moved about with a few of them at hand.

There was no sign of the Alliance of Stone and Steel. Their forces had retreated even before the emperor had launched his rockets. According to Diroh, the gorgon had taken down one of the colossi, before giving the retreat order herself. The remaining two, in a considerably worn-down condition after taking the brunt of the Azure attacks, had been chipped down by the empires mages from a safe distance. Normally, Alien would have taken the credit, but considering the circumstances, it was more likely that hed snitch to the emperor.

A day after the major event, an emissary arrived at the cloud fort, informing everyone that the emperor had summoned them to the capital to mark the glorious victory. It was telling that while the

ruler had the means and ability to send messages anywhere instantly, he wasn't going to waste them on trivial matters, especially when he could use furies for the same.

The trip to the imperial palace was identical to the last one: mages and furies casting speed and air current spells until they dropped, only to be replaced by the next batch. By the time the imperial capital came into view, three quarters of the crew were exhausted.

Katka, who still needed to resort to healing spells, took special attention to make herself presentable. No illusions were used there was nothing more unappealing for high-level mages than seeing something wrapping itself in illusions. Probably that was the reason many of the senior mages disliked going about the Academy; unlike apprentices and novices, they could see the fakeness all about.

Dallion, on the other hand, had only taken the time to venture into the realms of his clothes and mend them. He could easily have improved them a few levels, but for some reason he didn't see the need. Even with the level cap removed, he found the effort pointless right now.

Looks different, doesn't it? Vihrogon asked as the cloud gently ventured towards the palace. That's what area realms really look like.

The simplest thing was to say that they looked like marbles in the vast sea that was the wilderness. In the eyes of a domain ruler, they were so much more. Every building and area was its own bubble realm, filling in the giant sphere that held the city itself. It was a testament to a noble's strength and the delicate game of politics that went into keeping things together. Come to think of it, there was no better metaphor for politics: arranging the interests of all people in such a way that the construct wouldn't topple. Domains of guilds, important awakened, nobles, and even the branches of the imperial family itself filled the space that belonged to the emperor. Coincidentally, or not, the realms of the weaker were beneath the ones they supported.

You should have taken Gleam along, the dryad added. Entering with her would have created a good impression.

The emperor's already aware of her, Dallion whispered.

Really? Vihrogon mocked. It's not for the emperor. It's for everyone else. For the next few weeks, no one will know what to make of you. This is the only time to make an impression. Since you're still a hunter

And mage, Dallion added.

you're expected to be rough around the edges. Would have been better coming here riding on a dragon, but Eury got you beat there.

That was true.

Gleam needs to settle things before she comes back. And naturally, Ruby had tagged along.

Dallion was the first to set foot in the imperial palace, followed by Alien, Katka, and a small selection of crimson furies. Dihor, despite her royal lineage, remained viewed as an apprentice and as such remained on the cloud fort.

You made it back. It didnt take long for the overseer child to appear.

Glad to see your attitude hasnt changed. Same place as before? Dallion asked.

The emperor is busy at present.

Busy? He summoned me! Dallion wanted to say. It was a clear provocation, and the start of his political tightrope routine. If he appeared openly too aggressive, the emperor could decide it would be more trouble controlling him than it was worth. If he appeared too obedient, all the more important nobles would rush to take advantage.

Then Ill return when hes available again.

The overseers eyes narrowed. That would be a mistake, baron.

Are you saying I should go see him even when hes busy?

There was a long pause. For a moment it seemed that even guardians had frozen, observing how things would unfold from here. Judging by the platinum-blonds frown, no one had confronted him in this manner before. Technically, he was the master of the current area realm Dallion was standing in. As a key guardian, he could have distorted the realm to attack Dallion, not to mention charge at him himself. Judging by the emanating ruthlessness, the overseer was contemplating it. Before anything had a chance to happen, another overseer appeared, placing his hand on the boys shoulder.

Forgive him, baron, the newcomer said with a polite smile. My junior has only been in the role for a few years. He still has a few things to learn.

The new overseer appeared to be in his early thirties, dressed in black, as all overseers were, and with a black half-mask covering his place. It was obvious to any awakened that he was a lot more powerful than the other.

Clever move, Dallion thought. On the surface it was the boy that had gotten the warning, but in truth it had been issued to Dallion. The imperial overseers were aware of his position and strength and were telling him to know his place.

You wont have to wait long. The emperor is not the one who summoned you, the older overseer clarified. Duchess Elazni was the one who made the request.

From what Dallion remembered, she was of the first imperial branch family and the one proper one. For a nothing noble like him to be summoned by her had to be viewed as a great honor, although it also was a sign of danger.

My apologies, Dallion said with a slight bow. Getting in tune with the overall act, he wasnt bowing to the overseers, but to the emperor. I wouldnt have expected any of the duchesses to request seeing someone as insignificant as me.

Youre overdoing it a bit, Vihrogon said. Self-deprecation isnt a virtue. Most would view it as sarcasm.

Rising stars are always noticed. After your exploits in Nerosal, it was expected that you'd join the ranks of nobility a while back. It was only your sudden magical detour that made that attention fade. Now that you're pushed through nonetheless, the interest is back tenfold.

It was getting difficult to determine whether that was praise or a threat.

Will you take me where I need to go? Dallion asked.

Of course. The overseer then turned to Alien. Archmage, the emperor has requested to see you.

Based on the others' silence, that wasn't a good thing.

I'll leave them in your hands, the overseer told the platinum-blond boy. This way, if you will, baron. He started walking.

Not terrible, but you really need to learn a bit of noble etiquette, dear boy, Adzorg said. On the other hand, it will be fun seeing Alien squirm.

Right.

While the thought did provide some amusement, Dallion still wondered why a duchess would summon him. There had to be more than just making his acquaintance. What was more, it had to be important enough to demand the urgency. Hopefully, it wasn't going to be anything he would regret.