

Leveling up 821

Chapter 821: The Count's Challenge

I see youre surprised, Count Pili said. I was as well when I found out that you two were involved.

Can anyone give me some hints? Dallion asked, addressing every guardian in the room.

A few whispers emerged items generations old, not scared of speaking their mind, and grumbling about it. For the most part, they went on about the better days of the past when the Pili name was something to be reckoned with and even the imperial family treated them as equals. Among the rants and grumbling, Dallion learned that it was common, even expected, for members of certain families to be offered to the imperial army where they would be made officers.

This is your family, Dallion said, looking at March. Before

The unfortunate incident, the count finished the sentence. The emperor was generous enough not to punish the family for her actions. He even allowed us to know her new self.

Clearly, nobility had a few advantages even when it came to banishment.

Once per year shed visit, marking the event. Today, though, she made an exception.

You sent for me, father. On the outside, March remained calm. Internally, though, there was enough anger coming from her that Dallion feared she might attack the old man.

It was interesting that Tonia looked nothing like the armor-clad mercenary. Even their magic threads were drastically different.

Months ago, the count said calmly. Whats important is that youre now here and could indulge our guest with events on the outside.

The tension in the room grew thick. The only person who was remotely amusing himself was the count, although even he seemed more eager to be left with Dallions weapons than anything else. Given the number of void items in the room, Dallion didnt think it was such a good idea.

Maybe you should move the conversation to the forge, father, Tonia suggested. As a forger, Im sure youd like to see him work. Besides, Im sure there are things you and the pause was longer than it needed to be March would like to discuss in private.

So eager to run off? The counts tone suggested that he had already made his decision, just didnt see the need to voice it. What do you think? he turned to Dallion. Shall we stay a bit more and admire my collection, or should we go to the forge?

How can I refuse either? Dallion let out a polite laugh. It would be a crime not to admire these beautiful weapons a bit longer.

The next few hours passed Dallion moving from item to item with the count closely behind, more than eager to provide details. Every weapon had its story, some more truthful than others. It quickly became obvious that all the items had banished races as their guardians. The dryads were eager to have a chat with Dallion, as was their nature. The nymphs were reserved and the sole copyette was remarkably silent, as if deliberately keeping its distance.

Servants came and went, frequently bringing refreshments and making the usual inquiries. When every trophy had been thoroughly examined, the count finally gave the order for the servants to prepare the forge for him. He excused himself and went to get into a more appropriate attire for work. Tonia barely waited a few seconds after he had left the room, before leaving as well.

She doesnt seem to like you much, Dallion whispered to March.

Different mothers, the woman explained. The catastrophe didnt help, either. Good job on finding Adzorg. If nothing else, Hannah will be pleased hes still alive.

Yeah. If only he could share how things really went down. Just like few would know about Dallions fight against the Star, the battle against the void and Adzorgs help in that battle would remain unknown. We were lucky that the device never got completed.

Will you hand him over to the Order?

Adzorg? Maybe. I havent decided yet.

You always were sentimental. March shook her head. On that note, Vend sends his best.

Good to know hes fine.

Hes seen better days, but yes, hes well enough. Not much else is, though. March paused for a moment. You poked a hornets nest at the vortex fields. Every mercenary and two-bit merchant has flooded the place, hoping to find something they could sell off.

What could they sell? Dallion snorted. Glass?

Wont be the first time. The glass mounts were a source of that for decades. The fighting hasnt stopped. Everyone seems to think that the emperor destroyed the Azures greatest weapon, but thats not true. The really significant forces are still there and her words trailed off. Theres something else I need to talk to you about.

Dallion offered his hand.

No. March shook her head. Not here, not even like this.

The door of the trophy room opened.

Sir, madam, the count is ready and would like you to accompany him to the Pili forge.

That quickly put an end to the conversation. The two nobles joined their host, then left the mansion, making their way through the streets of the city. On the way, Dallion saw that the party in his house wasnt the only one going on. If there was a city that didnt sleep in this world, the imperial capital was it. That was another thing that Dallion found strange. The city was the only one that he knew of that didnt have a name. Initially, he expected it to be called Tamin or something similar, but Imperial Capital was the actual name.

Is it possible for a city to be banished? He asked in his realm.

No one rushed to answer.

Well, in theory I suppose it would be, Adzorg ventured a guess. Although Im not sure how youd banish someone already banished. The owner of the city could

be banished and have their name erased from existence. I guess if it ever happened, theres no way anyone would know.

Think this one was?

You do present an interesting question, dear boy. I suppose if it had been long ago, back before the empire existed, it wouldnt be out of the question. But it would take the Moons to do such a thing.

The Moons, Dallion mused.

By the way, I would take anything March says with a bucket of salt. The girl still hasnt forgiven me for my mishap, and while I can understand, even sympathize, it is starting to get a bit old.

I know.

No metalins roamed the streets, even at this time of night. Yet they were always there, present in every part of the city, as long as one knew where to look. Somethe massive onesacted as majestic city statues, so integrated with the city that people wouldnt think twice. Dallion could see the magic threads within them shine so brightly that on a few occasions he was forced to wince. To make things even more complicated and annoying, magic didnt follow the standard laws shining through structures and other solid objects.

Here we are, Count Pilih said as they arrived. After you, Baron. He invited Dallion to enter first.

Im honored, Dallion smiled and entered the forge.

The building seemed very different from what he had seen only a day ago. The lack of people made it seem asleep, almost dead. All the large doors were closed, boxing out the work area and largely diminishing its grandeur.

It looks far better during the day, the count noted. The emanations coming from him made him appear a completely different person. Gone were the traces of pride and snobbishness. Now there was only focus and determination. I leave you to choose.

Of course, Dallion nodded. Before that, though

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Reality shifted, bringing Dallion to his realm. There was no sign of the recent invasion attempt that took place during the duel. Not only that, but Gen had removed the changes that Dallion had performed on the sea.

Youll have to fix that, a young voice said.

Dallion turned around to see Julythe echo that was most in tune with creature guardians. He had been created the same time that Gleam had joined Dallions realm as his guardian, and other than Ruby, the one closest to her.

Gleam would like that.

Gleam doesnt have to be linked to my realm anymore, Dallion said.

I know. Shed still like it if you fixed it.

There was no point in continuing the conversation. The echo knew exactly what Dallion was thinking; he already knew that hed need a whip-blade, and having it become Gleams home was only natural. The only fear he had was that the item wouldnt be indestructible. Then again, just because something was supposed to be indestructible didnt mean it couldnt be shattered.

Boss! Lux popped out of the air nearby. The cyan firebird was as cheerful as ever, this time, also carrying Dallions aetherfish familiar along. What are we doing, boss? Invading someone?

Easy there, Dallion laughed, reaching out to pet the creature. In the past, the action was impossible, but by extending his magic threads throughout his palms, Dallion now had the option. Im just here to talk with Onda.

What about teaching me new skills? Lux continued in the same breath. Do I get to learn new skills?

Ill teach you guys new skills, I promise. Dallion felt like his father coming home from work. Back when Dallion was still young, hed constantly pester his parents to spend more time with him, and often grumble when they didnt. Now he could see that there were a lot of other responsibilities that came along with parenthood.

When is big sis coming back?

Soon, July said, redirecting the firebirds attention to himself. Shell be back soon. Thats why Dal needs to chat with Onda, to forge her new home.

Ah, ok. Lux chirped. Can I watch?

Since no wasnt an option, Dallion let the flames of the firebird envelop him, then fly him to the nymphs tower.

To little surprise, the hammer guardian was there. To an even lesser surprise, his entire body was full of blobs of grumpiness.

Of course, Dallion sighed internally. He had finished dealing with the children and now had to have a conversation with the teenager.

Hey, he said, moving directly to the point.

Here for a favor, right? The nymph glared at him. Thats so not chill.

Its not like you dared teach me much last time

Time here only lasts a moment outside! You could have visited, old man! You only come here when theres an invasion or you want to level up, or

I need to learn how to forge the good stuff, and I need to learn it in a single outside moment. Dallion wasnt in the mood of getting any lip. He knew for a fact that the nymph meant well, but his indecisiveness before becoming a domain ruler had allowed too many people to take him for granted, even those in his own realm. Its for Gleam, he added with a note of softness.

For Gleam Onda looked away, a few specks of guilt emerging in his head.

And also to be ready for the dozen of void weapons that I just came across.

You crazy? Onda almost shouted. There's no way you can take all those! You couldn't even kick Vihs ass! How

That's why I need you to teach me top tier forging, Dallion interrupted again. Normal weapons won't do. I want to be able to make magic weapons. Blossoming weapons, origami weapons, even world weapons, if you know how to make them.

If there was a time to ask the impossible, it was now. To Dallion's surprise, the nymph didn't talk back. One would have thought that he'd retort that it was impossible to make world weapons, but instead, he just stood there, staring at Dallion, as if to measure his determination.

You really want to go that far? the guardian asked. To reach the top of the top?

Yes. And in one real world moment.

You can't. You need to boost your skills to a hundred for world weapons. The rest, though I can teach you.

Okay. Let's get started.

Chapter 822: Magic Forging

Getting ready to forge felt slightly unusual. The realm had a special location for that, but Dallion decided to stir things a bit by forming a temporary forge in the sea itself. This was just a practice session; the real thing would take place in the real world.

Anvils and ingots were summoned and arranged neatly with a host of other instruments. The sky silver hammer was also there, but the moment Dallion took hold of it, the guardian shook his head.

You won't be using that, he said.

Why not?

Big man, Onda crossed his arms.

One brief glance from Dallion quickly told him that it wasn't the best time to mess around. And just to make things more ominous, Harp was also there, sitting a short distance away atop a seat of water.

You need to learn how to splice magic. Bronze is the easiest. When you get the hang of that, you can move on to more unfriendly metals.

Unfriendly metals, Dallion repeated, amused. Never heard that expression.

It's because the other races can't do it. Humans are good at magic, dwarves are good at forging, but only we do both.

The boast sounded wrong on a few levels, to the point that even Harp sighed. Still, Dallion could understand what the teen nymph was going for.

What about furies?

Close and yet so far away. Besides, they still only use natural magic. Anyway, watch carefully.

Taking an ingot of bronze, Onda proceeded to melt it in the furnace Dallion had created in the temporary sea forge. All of the realm's inhabitants had gathered, observing the process with interest. Even Vermillion rose up from the sea, water splashing off the massive island that was his head.

Molten bronze poured into a crucible of aether. The nymph then took it with his bare hands and glanced at Dallion.

This is the important part. Magic threads extended from Ondas hand, slowly falling into the crucible, like a line of syrup.

This wasnt the first time Dallion had seen magic threads extending out of someones body. It wasnt even the first time he had seen them transferred into something else, yet the method was not what he had expected.

Just like potions, he said.

Err yes, lets go with that for now. The first step is to just get the magic there and form it. In my case, its easier since Im casting the spell as the threads fall in. Youll have to make your spell before you let it mix with the metal.

Seems simple so far. Mentally Dallion repeated the process. Each of the separate elements was easy to perform. Because of magics nature, there was no difference if he was mixing it with water or with molten metal.

Yeah, right, Onda didnt sound at all convinced. You cant let it dissolve freely, nor can you constrain it. Making potions is simple: the threads can become their own thing in the liquid. With this, you have to keep the spell as you harden it.

Hundreds of markers appeared everywhere around the molten metal. There were purple ones, showing the state of the spell and how it could be modified, silver ones indicating what Dallion could bend it into, and finally gold indicating how to thread and weave one into the other while maintaining its integrity. For all intents and purposes, it was like looking at the lighting of a foldable Christmas tree.

Ill show you the quick way, the nymph said, scooping out the gooey metal with his bare hand.

Looking closely, Dallion could see the thin layer of magic covering his skin. On closer inspection, he found that it wasnt a layer, but a fine mesh of magic threads.

Almost like a dwarf, Onda stretched and folded the cooling metal. Initially, it seemed as if he were creating a blob of nothingness, but with each modification an object gained shape. After a while, the blob was replaced by a glowing red origami.

Keeping up? A note of smugness was audible in the nymphs voice. Bam! Spells still intact. Now I just finalize the final form and...

Onda waved the dagger through the air, using a magic spell to steal away all its heat. In less than a second, the final item was complete.

Here, he offered it to Dallion. Take a close look.

With his current magic trait value, Dallion didnt need to. He could see the thread clusters within the hardened metal. What was more, he could also read the instructions they contained, rendering the material around them flexible.

So, this is how you make origami weapons, he said, slashing the air with the dagger. One thought was enough to instantly transform the weapon into a sickle. One more, and it was a fork.

Thats not the real deal, Onda quickly said defensively. First thing I came up with.

Its fine, its fine. Dallion applied some pressure.

Not being the strongest of weapons, the dagger snapped. Purple sparks flashed as the magic was released into the air, becoming part of the realm.

Yeah, sure, Onda grumbled. Do that.

And the spell determines the effects of the weapon?

For cheap stuff, yeah. The nymph shrugged. Have a few goes. Youll see, its not as easy as you think.

Summoning another bronze ingot, Dallion split into a hundred instances and went into action. It took him considerably longer to fill the crucible. All the time there was the temptation to use a spell, but as he rightly suspected, using spellcraft left a trace within the material, causing the real spell to fizzle.

For his first time, Dallion decided to go with something simple, namely a fire sword. The spell was simple enough, as was using his magic threads to compose it in a near state of completion. The way he saw it, the spell had to become complete within the molten bronze, not before.

Dont overcook it, Onda said, peeking over Dallions shoulder.

What do you take me for? Dallion asked, even if there were five instances in which he had done just that.

Once the spell was safely mixed into the bronze came time for the most difficult partthe shaping. Normally, Dallion would pour the material into a mold and start hammering it afterwards. In ten of his instances, he created an aether mold, pouring the liquid in to start cooling. That, unfortunately, turned out to be a flop. As Dallion suspected, his control wasnt fine enough for him to prevent the aether from affecting his spell. In nine of the ten instances, the whole thing exploded in his face. In the tenth, it merely burned like a flamethrower.

Thats one thing to avoid, Dallion thought, moving to plan b: sand molds. Since this was his realm, he could easily erect anything anywhere, which is what he did, causing a square pillar of sand to rise up from the space in front of him. The shape of a blade formed within the sand, in which he then poured the magic bronze.

Not bad, Onda nodded. Its cool to control a realm.

You control your own realm, Dallion said, careful not to cause the spell to escape its wrapping.

Yeah, yeah. Keep telling yourself.

It seemed an eternity before the blade could cool down enough to the point it lost its glow. Copying the methods hed seen from the nymph, Dallion covered his skin with magic threads and picked it up. The weapon was rough, crude even. However, one slash through the air was enough to reveal the trail of fire it left behind.

MAGIC WEAPON EXTREME

(+2 Perception, +2 Reaction)

Congrats! Your first magic weapon. It takes quick reflexes and good eyesight to make one of those. A pity you went with such a cliché.

Everyone's a critic, Dallion whispered as he slashed through the blue rectangle, causing it to disappear in a cloud of fading particles. I admit, I'll need a bit more practice, he turned to Onda.

Nope. You'll need a lot more practice. After getting the hang, we move on to unfriendly metals. Then, maybe in a week, we start the real stuff.

Real stuff?

You thought that was it? Onda laughed. Maybe for another race, but that's not nymph magic forging. Anyone can make crap. If you want to do something cool, you'll need the right tools.

And by that, you mean?

A new hammer. I'm teaching you all this to make a magic hammer.

There was no dishonesty emanating from the guardian, but even so Dallion turned towards Harp. So far, she had remained silent, observing the toil with interest and even a smidge of pride. Seeing Dallion's hesitation, the guardian nodded.

Guess there's no way around it, Dallion thought and summoned a new ingot of bronze.

The training continued. Hours turned into days, then despite Dallion's best attempts to weeks. This time it wasn't someone else holding him back, but his own desire for perfection. Having obtained the power of a domain ruler, he no longer wanted to be limited by his personal domain, but to create a new one in the real world. More than that, he wanted to take all inhabitants from this place along with him. Despite the beauty of the realm, despite all the levels it had provided him, all the valuable insight in getting there, it had completed its task. From this point on, it wouldn't grow, no matter what Dallion did. As such, it was best to leave it among his memories and continue to bigger and better things.

With every new weapon, the quality drastically improved, as did the spell effects linked to it. It was slightly annoying that such crafting could no longer affect his forging and spellcraft skills, but every now and again an achievement would pop up within a blue rectangle.

Three of them boosted his reaction and perception traits, same as the first one. The fourth called Industrial Machine provided five points to his body trait.

Each night, when Dallion stopped to take a rest, he'd spend the time chatting with his familiars and guardians. It was almost like in the past, as if he was reliving things from his awakened childhood. For the blink of an eye, he could forget his cares and the outside world. Alas, at some point, even the endlessly stretched moment came to an end.

Once Dallion mastered the process of creating magic weapons out of sky silver, it was time to complete the final step.

That's actually cool, Onda said, fascinated by the latest weapon Dallion had made.

The weapon itself was a whip blade that used an aether thread instead of a physical one. It wasn't hard to guess who the weapon was intended for, just as there was no denying that she'd like it.

So. Dallion brushed the sweat off his forehead. The final step?

A final step, Onda said, suggesting it wasn't. A major step in any event. Changing this is like acquiring a new skill. You'll be able to forge magic in the real world with just a hammer and a bit of effort.

Even with a normal one?

When you learn the process, there will be no normal hammers. You'll be able to thread your magic through all of them and maybe not bust them in the process.

That can happen? Dallion was amused.

There's a reason blacksmiths hated me, the guardian grumbled. Anyway, summon your sky silver hammer.

Dallion did so.

That's your skill, so you can't melt it. Instead, you have to push the magic threads through.

Sounds easy. Dallion looked at the hammer. Mixing magic with molten sky silver was difficult; this was likely going to be ten times as tricky. Yet, he didn't feel it to be in the least impossible. Any spell I choose?

No spell. Onda took a step back. You need to make a hammer.

Huh? What do you mean?

You can see magic threads, right?

All the time.

If you ignore the physical outline of their container, can you tell what they are?

The past Dallion would have come back with a quirky answer of sorts. Now, though, he kept his mouth shut, considering the question. It was undeniable that the threads in every magic entity, be it item, area, or creature, were unique. What was more, with enough practice, one could distinguish the object by magic alone.

No spell. Dallion extended the magic outside of his fingertips. No metal.

The entire reason that Onda had trained him for weeks wasn't for him to create a new hammer with metal, but out of magic and then place it into a shell he already owned.

Here goes

Ignoring the physicality of the hammer, the magic threads went inside. Dallion had to be careful: the threads weren't supposed to get stuck, just as they weren't supposed to pass through the object entirely.

Like vines in a bottle, they continued, twisting throughout the middle of the hammer, though never going beyond its outer limits. Twisting and turning, they went in further and further. Feeling the magic within him decrease, Dallion reached out, taking a few strands from the realm itself.

For several minutes, he went on, changing the position of the threads so they acquired the form he wanted them to. Only then, when everything was perfect, he severed them, releasing the magic within the hammer.

MAGIC FORGING obtained.

Youve broken through your eighty-sixth barrier.

You are Level 86.

Choose the trait you value the most.

Chapter 823: Behind a Living Mask

The personal realm condensed into a dot, revealing the boring reality of the counts workshop. The splendor that Dallion had seen before was now like a candle compared to the rising sun. With all the things on his mind lately, he had completely forgotten what a wonder his world had become. It also helped that he had two Moonstones there.

What materials can I use? Dallion asked, heading to the spot closest to the large bellows.

Anything you see. The count crossed his arms. A slight change in his emotions made it clear he had noticed Dallions leveling, yet was polite enough not to comment on it. Same with the tools.

Thank you. Dallion cast a brief spell, summoning his triangular hammer. But I have my own.

Congratulations. Seems youre not all talk.

It had been a while since Dallion had flexed his forging skills; it had been even longer since he had pushed them to such an extent. The start of the process was quite normal: selecting the materials hed use a lot of sky silver and just a bit of sun gold heating them separately, then starting to work on the main body of the weapon.

The first few minutes, nothing special happened. Dallions skills were impressive for an amateur, yet still lacking compared to someone who did that for a living. The disappointment from the count slowly grew until suddenly Dallion went to the next stage.

Lets see how this goes, he thought, extending the magic through his hand and into the hammer.

The process was a lot more difficult than it had been in his realm. The real world wasnt as uniform and forgiving as a theoretical concept. Even after splitting into thirty instances, getting the magic threads to become the core of the hammer felt like threading a needle through a labyrinth. Once done, forging markers covered the piece of metal.

Is this normal? Dallion asked.

Thats the effect of magic, dear boy, Adzrog said. Still, its rather remarkable. Ive never seen it affect the real world in such a way.

I take it most mage blacksmiths didnt have my level of forging?

Most didnt have your level of anything. Going above eighty on magic is expected. Going over a hundred is also not that unusual. Everything else, though. Most traits level off around fifty.

You changed your technique. The boredom coming from the count quickly vanished. Very interesting method. Ive only seen it a few times before.

You flatter me. Dallion kept on working. Im sure a lot of skilled people have passed through here.

Thats true. Count Pilih nodded. Some still are. Are you using magic? he asked all of a sudden.

Does it show?

You really are interesting. Im glad I wasnt mistaken. The way you started, I thought you were nothing special, but this The noble nodded a few times in recognition. You still lack a bit of polish, but few value the form of the craft nowadays. What sort of weapon are you making?

Something that I think youd appreciate.

Magic threads entered the chunk of metal at every strike. The material bent like soft clay, obtaining the form it was supposed to. However, instead of spreading the length of the weapon, Dallion clustered it into groups.

There was no need to wait for the blade to cool down. Thanks to the magic and his awakened skills, it folded into a perfect shape in the course of the shaping. In twenty minutes, the weapon was fit to be placed in a museum.

Exceptional, the count whispered.

Not yet. Dallion smiled, then swung the blade above the anvil. Only the tang followed the motion, tightly held in Dallions hand. The rest broke up into wedge-like pieces that fell towards the ground. Before they could reach it, though, Dallion cast a quick spell to keep them levitating in the air.

A whip blade. The count shook his head, amused. Its the first time Ive seen it made in that fashion.

Everything is one whole, Dallion said, starting to work on the sun gold. When combined, itll be completely seamless, unless you need it not to be.

Not bad. It would have been better to change the materials. Sun gold would be more suited for a weapon of this nature. That way, the awakened could also modify their shape if needed.

You really expect a lot, dont you?

There was no right or wrong in this situation. Dallion viewed the scene from the eyes of someone who had just learned to magic forge a moment ago. Count Pilih, on the other hand, assumed Dallion had the skill ever since hed joined the Academy.

Simplicity displays the skill, Dallion said. I didnt want to mask my lack of experience with fanciness.

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, appreciation emanated from the noble. With a flick of his hand, he ordered the servant in the workroom out.

Ill miss the daggers, but theyve found a nice replacement. Now, he rubbed his hands. Show me your other weapons again.

The battle won, Dallion summoned his entire arsenal, with the exception of the Nox dagger. The hammer, of course, he kept since he had found approval he had one other weapon to create.

Once the long thread of gold was done up to specifications, Dallion used his magic to thread it between the elements of the whip blade, finally completing the weapon. After that, it was only a simple matter to quickly create a suitable hilt using his newly found carving skills.

Your FORGING skills have increased to 64.

Your CARVING skills have increased to 2.

The purple rectangles flickered briefly before vanishing from reality.

Can I use some more sky silver for my own weapon? Dallion asked. House Elazni will cover the expenses.

Sure, sure. The count waved his hand, unable to move his attention away from Dallion's harp sword. March, hand me the blade bow, will you?

Maybe later, the woman said, crossing the space of the room up to Dallion.

Even in the imperial capital, family issues were a thing. Actually, this probably was the place where family relations were a minefield waiting to happen. With all the plots and hierarchies, one could never be sure if someone was about to ask for a favor, grant one, or was merely waiting for the right moment to stick a dagger in someone's back.

You didn't have to give him that, she whispered, discreetly handing Dallion a ring. One didn't have to be a genius to realize it was a blocking item.

Surely he'll notice, Dallion whispered back as he slid the ring on.

I doubt he'll notice if you set the place on fire, March said. Besides, the area guardian of this place isn't his. It belongs to the emperor. The great artisan count doesn't talk about it a lot, but he doesn't own this. The emperor lets him have it out of mercy and history precedent.

Harsh, Dallion thought.

I didn't just pop out from the blue, March continued.

I guessed as much, Dallion lied. Trouble in Nerosal?

Not just there. The emperor kicked a hornet's nest and now lots of things are crawling out of the woodwork.

The combination of metaphors wasn't something Dallion would have conceived, but he understood exactly what she meant.

You've already seen how impossible it is to give a shit about anything beyond the capital walls. It's just been one day and you're already thinking of yourself as part of this.

A very out-of-place part, Dallion said as he went to fetch several more ingots of sky silver. Still, there might be a way for me to get out of here soon. And who knows, the emperor might allow me to develop my own domain outside.

March didnt say a word. Instead, she looked at him, concern and pity emanating from her like a ringing bell.

Thats how it starts. The allure of the capital. I was the same, I know. When I joined the legions, I literally thought it would be a walk in the wilderness. My greatest concern was what boots and cloak to find so as not to get too much mud on them. Theres no actual talk about anything that happens out there. The monsters that roam the wilderness are seen as firetails that weak country nobles couldnt handle. Do you know that many consider the title archduke to be the same as a banished noble?

That sounded a bit extreme.

Not me, Dallion replied.

For now. Even now youre starting to think that this isnt such a bad place, arent you? And thats only after a day? Imagine what you would be like in a few weeks or months.

It takes power to destroy power. Ill hardly change that much. Im a level eighty now, not one of those fake nobles who leech off everyone else.

March shook her head.

You think you have a chance at playing the game? She looked over her shoulder at the count. You have the skills and you have the renown, so why not? The truth is that no one has a chance. Those that know that are better off than anyone else.

Just as discreetly as before, she pulled the blocker ring off Dallions finger. Not wanting to continue the conversation, Dallion let her do it.

You should visit more often, March said, heading towards the door. Im sure my father would enjoy seeing your weapons a few more times. You might even get a chance to claim another prize from his room.

March, wait, Dallion said all of a sudden, causing even the count to look away from the weapon he was holding. Id like to have a word with you about Nerosal. By your will, of course, Count Pilih, he quickly added.

Of course, of course. Take your time, just be sure to come back and finish what youre forging. Im eager to follow the process, only this time Ill be pointing out your mistakes.

It will be my honor, Dallion said in the politest tone possible as he followed March outside of the room.

Making their way past the few unfortunate guards and servants merely brought to increase the counts illusion of importance, the pair went to the street outside. This time, Dallion put his own blocker ring on. Just in case, he also briefly checked his personal realm to make sure everything was in order there.

Eager to convince me I have you wrong? March asked. You almost remind me of the boy that Jiroh brought to the guild. He knew nothing of awakening or how the world worked, but was ever so eager to defeat me in a training match.

Yeah, I was like that. All emotions within Dallion vanished, as he used his music skills to subdue them. Who are you?

March looked at her, head slightly tilted.

You're not March, Dallion added. And you're not using magic. That leaves only one thing, doesn't it?

For the briefest of moments, the woman's face rippled as if it were made of water. The skin's texture turned transparent, revealing its nature of a slime, or as the race was better known a copyette.

What gave it away? the creature asked, resuming the appearance of March.

You were too pushy. In retrospect, she was also careful to remain far from Dallion's bladebow, and especially the kaleidervisto that was part of it.

Oh, well. The copyette didn't seem at all upset. There always was a danger that you'd find out.

Two copyettes in a month? Back in Nerosal, there was doubt that even one could escape. Now they were popping up everywhere, and not only that. This was the second time a copyette had assisted Dallion.

Arthurows was right, Dallion said, fingers at the ready, be it for a spell or a spark infused point punch. You really are among us.

Leave it to a Star to know how the world works. Of course, he was aware. He was terrified by us, but not in the way you think. Our goal was never to take over the world. Rather, we couldn't if we tried. We were summoned here to serve a higher power.

Despite all his effort, Dallion felt a chill down his spine.

And what might that be? He prepared himself mentally.

Why, the archbishop, of course. Copyettes in the real world serve the Order of the Seven Moons.

Chapter 824: Twin Void Daggers

You work for the Order? Dallion asked just to confirm what he had heard.

After passing the fifth awakening gate, he believed there wouldn't be many mysteries in the world remaining, but he was mistaken. The world of nobles came with their own rules, and among the useless squabbles and political intrigue, there were a few secrets buried in plain sight.

We have for centuries, fake March replied.

Dallion's immediate reaction was to ask the inhabitants of his realm; it was one of the old habits he still hadn't quite kicked yet.

You've seen them, haven't you? The copyette continued. The void items that fill the city.

I've noticed a few.

There are thousands of them, scattered all over the capital. All of them remain hidden, but for those with enough skill, they're obvious.

Throughout the entire capital? Dallion's perspective suddenly changed. This wasn't a cage, it was a web drawing people to it. It was everyone's dream to get here. It was often said that awakened, nobles, even otherworlders were drawn to the capital. The only reason they weren't all going in

droves were effects of the other settlements overseers. A noble without a settlement wasn't a noble. Plus, the locals were very picky as to who they let in.

And neither you nor the Academy managed to figure this out?

The void isn't stupid, neither are those it corrupts. They keep their distance from the palace. The emperor is the only one who can freely take any possession he wants. Anyone else risks causing a major stir, even the Order. March looked at the sky. All seven Moons were shining above, yet there was no way of telling how many of them she could see. The few mages that get here are too blinded by the allure of the capital to do anything about it. If we're lucky, there might be one who tracks down half a dozen void items and brings them to us. But even if that happens, what's the point? Crumbs from a loaf.

Two servants approached hurriedly, carrying the prize Dallion had been promised. Even in the darkness, Dallion caught a glimpse of the void thread leaving the wooden box and disappearing further into the city.

The servants bowed to March and Dallion as they rushed into Pilihs forge. Although the gift was meant for Dallion, only the count had the privilege of handing it to him.

Amusing, aren't they? March smiled. It's quite possible they didn't start that way. All it takes is one corrupted item to slowly convert the rest. The whip blade you made has every chance of becoming one like them. It won't be right away. It might even take a generation or two, but eventually it'll happen.

Why tell me this? Another task from the archbishop?

Another? The copyette laughed. You still haven't finished the first.

The device was destroyed.

You haven't given Adzorg to us.

The emperor gave me Adzrog. Dallion didn't like where this was going.

It wasn't his decision to make. But even so, you've seen a room full of void items. You know exactly where they are. How about you go and cleanse them?

Dallion couldn't find a good response. The question wasn't so much whether he would or not. The real question was why hadn't he done so up to now? Nothing prevented him from entering the realm of every item in the trophy room and defeating the trophy. The fights would be difficult, no doubt, but thanks to Harp, he stood more than a good chance of pulling it off.

I'm not sure, Dallion admitted. I'll do it soon enough, he added mentally.

That's just an excuse. No doubt you have some sort of plan, but it won't work.

How can you be so sure?

Because it was in the archbishop's prophecy.

Silence filled the street, only broken by the distant laughter of parties throughout the capital. Knowing that the conversation had come to an end, March walked off.

My work is done here, she said. Ive said what I was supposed to. From here on, events will happen as the archbishop has foreseen. Dont keep my father waiting. Hes not the most patient man, even when hes surrounded by toys.

His prophecy was wrong once, Dallion raised his voice. It might be wrong again.

In that case, you have nothing to worry about. March walked on.

Dallion kept on looking for another few moments, almost expecting her to transform into something else. However, the copyette retained its chosen form. As far as everyone was concerned, it was Marcha copy so flawless that even the city overseers hadnt taken notice.

Sir? A servant peeked out from the forges entrance. Count Pilih has inquired regarding your health.

Yes. Dallion removed all traces of reluctance from his voice as he spoke. Im fine, and Ill join him shortly.

Copyettes and void items within the imperial city. The whole spectacle about the Order leaving was nothing but a charade. They had never left, remaining in the form of local inhabitants. No one could be certain how many of them there were, nor where. The same could be said about the void weapons. The far greater war between the void and the servants of the Moons was still going on behind the scenes of world events. That explained why no one had managed to kill off the cultsthey had been hiding in the imperial capital all along.

Did any of you get that? Dallion slid off his blocker ring.

Yeah, Gen replied. Maybe staying here isnt the best idea, after all.

The rest of nightand morningwas spent creating a second whip blade under the counts strict instructions. Dallion proceeded as normal, the only difference being that instead of using a sun gold thread, he attached the blade fragments together directly with magic. Count Pilih would remain a few steps away, carefully observing every action, constantly commenting on how things could be done better. Any other time Dallion would have been appreciative, but his mind was still focused on the conversation.

The presence of void items couldnt be ignored and neither could the Order. March hadnt admitted openly, but it was clear that the archbishop wasnt pleased with Dallions decision to shield Adzorg from consequences.

Why must it be at the worst time? he wondered.

He was starting to understand the domain ruler game; more importantly, he was on track to discover what had happened to his grandmother. And just like that, everything pulled him out of the city again, back to the wilderness and Nerosal.

By noon, and a lengthy breakfast with Count Pilih, Dallion was finally allowed to return to his home. The majority of his weapons had been transported directly to his personal realm, with the exception of the void daggers. Those, Dallion decided to carry. There was no point in taking useless risks. On the way, he tried to follow the direction of the void threads, but that proved impossible. Just when he thought he had caught the direction, the thread would turn, pointing to a completely different direction altogether.

Contrary to his expectations, his mansion was in a far better state than he expected. All the surprise guests had left, probably to sleep, leaving a very stoic Taem behind.

Welcome back, young master, he said the moment Dallion stepped through the door. I take it your night went well.

In a manner of speaking, Dallion replied.

Wonderful. Id like to inform you that the young duchess said shed pass by at some point today. There are a few matters shed like to discuss with you.

Great. Any idea what?

Unfortunately, I have no idea, sir. Such matters are only meant for you.

Most likely, it was going to be some familial matter again. With a family like this, there was no telling whether she disliked Dallion or Tors more. On the one hand, Tors was a marquis, which meant his claim for the head of the family was greater. Then again, Dallion remained a wildcard, so maybe she wanted to make sure he wouldnt ruin her political aspirations.

Did she say when? Dallion made his way to the upper floor.

Not exactly, sir.

Of course, she wouldnt. Ill be somewhere upstairs until she gets here.

Splendid, young master. Oh, and your friend said that hell pass later this evening for the gift you promised him.

This time Dallion only grumbled.

On the bright side, youll know that hell be punctual, Vihrogon said. Leeches are always punctual when collecting. It's the delivery that takes time.

Dallions initial thought was just to get rid of the pesky noble. Sadly, with everything going on, that might prove to be the only way to sneak out.

Entering what seemed to be a small library, Dallion closed the door and cast a barrier spell on it. Done, he placed the wooden box on the ground and opened it. As if they sensed his intentions, the daggers had hidden all traces of void, becoming nothing more but two very exquisite works of art. Alas, for them, Dallion knew better.

Ready, Harp? he asked.

Always, the nymph replied in her own voice.

ITEM AWAKENING

Reality shifted. Dallion expected to find himself in a room, as was usually the case with items. Instead, he found himself at the entrance of a gray castle atop a cliff. Clear skies continued as far as the eye could see in all directions, even below.

This must have taken a lot of remodeling, Dallion said to himself.

You are in a vast onyx domain.

Defeat the guardians to change the TWIN DAGGERS destiny.

Twin Daggers?

It means they affect each other, dear boy, Adzorg explained. They are particularly well suited for arts skill combat. Its said that in the early days of the empire, they were used by high caliber assassins. Lately, though, its mostly for operas and other entertainment.

Both the harpsisword and aura sword appeared in Dallions hands. Shortly after, they were followed by the armadil shield on his back, and all his familiars. Gleam and Ruby were missing, but they werent necessary for the fight. If Dallion wasnt able to win with what he had at present, he wasnt going to win at all.

Careful, Vihrogon said. Theres two of them, and the void provides a lot of strength.

Thats why I didnt come alone. How about you come out here? Dallion asked, filling his words with self-confidence. Theres no reason we cant talk for a bit.

Wow. Really?

The voice sounded youthful. The owner had to be in his late teens or early twenties before banishment. The slight accent sounded dryady, although Dallion couldnt be absolutely certain.

I bet youre just here to improve us, right? another voice, this time female, asked.

Why? Is there a problem?

Laughter poured onto him, coming from all directions.

Youre cute, the female voice said.

And stupid, the other added. The void warned us about you. Never thought wed cross paths this fast.

I take it youve heard of me then? Dallion swung his aura sword, casting a dozen spells. One of them granted him the ability to fly. The rest wrapped around him, forming pieces of aether armor. In that case, you know Ill accept your surrender.

Dream on, both daggers said in unison.

So much for that approach. Apparently, void items didnt have the option to surrender.

How about we make a deal? Dallion asked. If I improve you, you promise to tell me all about the void.

Okay. The laughter suggested there might be doubts regarding the truthfulness of that response. And if we win?

The void will get its new Star.

Why do you think there isnt one already? the female voice asked.

Id know if there was, Dallion replied. It was a lie, of course. There likely were plenty of candidates, some in the imperial capital itself. Yet, if that were the case, they wouldnt resist taking him on to prove a point, if nothing else. What do you say?

COMBAT INITIATED

The entire castle was sliced in four as two line strikes flew in Dallions direction.

Chapter 825: Permanent Effect - Corruption Seed

ATTACK NEGATION FAILED

You were unable to affect the TWIN DAGGERS attack.

Dallions line attack shattered mid air as he leaped to the side. Even at his speed one of the strikes grazed him, shattering a layer of his protective spells.

This was the first time that Dallion had experienced an x-based attack. It was very different from two line attacks. One could better describe it as being four attacks merged into one. No wonder the strike of his harpsisword had failed to stop their attack.

Sweet, Dallion slashed the air with his aura sword.

Dozens of spells formed, each propelling hundreds of aether shards at the castle still in the air. Like termites, the shards chipped away through stone and metal, devouring the chunks already created by the daggers attack. Before they could hit any opponent, though, the guardians leaped safely away from the attack area.

Magic? Dallion thought.

He knew of magic items, and he knew of guardians that knew magic, yet he had failed to see either. It took him a moment to switch his thinking. Thanks to his high perception and magic traits he was able to see strands and patterns similar to magic, but these spells werent made of aether, merely void.

ITEM GUARDIANS NOSHT & ZDRACH

Species: NIGHT DRYADS

Class: SHADOW

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY 80**
- **MIND 40**
- **REACTION 60**
- **PERCEPTION 40**
- **EMPATHY 20**

Skills:

- **TWINCRAFT**

- **ATTACK**

- **GUARD**

- **ATHLETICS**

- **ENTANGLE**

- **ACROBATICS**

- **CARVING**

- **ARTS**

- **ROOT BURST (Species unique)**

- **LEAF SHIELD (Species unique)**

This was the first time Dallion had gotten to see them. The pair were dressed in a black adventurer clothes made of dark matter. Both had long pitch-black hair and delicate faces that would make them more at home in a pop idol magazine.

Whats with the twins lately? Dallion asked.

As he did, the castle that had been largely reduced to dust started to restore itself. It was like looking at sand pouring back up to its previous shape.

Theyre twin weapons, Onda said. Two entities linked into one. Stats, realms, abilities are the same.

That means their healths the same.

What he means, dear boy, is that they are the same, Adzorg joined in. This isnt like the vortex guardians that you faced. In that case, they were two entities sent to defend an unusual situation. Youre fighting one single item in this case. Great blacksmiths forge exceptional items, but only exceptional crafters can create a single item split into two. Their guardians may seem separate, but they arent. Its like facing magic echoes.

Magic echoes? Magic threads flowed into the aura blade. Multiple spheres of purple formed around the weapon as a complex spell gained form.

Fingerless magic? the female dagger asked. Wow, youre good.

Not that good. The male dryad smirked. Hes still slow.

Before he could finish his sentence, a new series of line attacks had been made, flying towards Dallion like a lethal grid of destruction. There was no escaping it, so Dallion didnt even try. Instead, he concentrated on one cross point of the grid, unleashing a dozen point attacks.

Ten attacks slammed into the target without effect.

ATTACK NEGATED

You partially negated the TWIN DAGGERS attack.

Two red rectangles finally appeared, stacking up atop the ten previous failures.

In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't much of an achievement, creating a single hole in the grid. However, that happened to be precisely enough for Dallion to evade any negative consequences, while still continuing with his spell.

I really need to get faster at this, he thought.

Magic echoes were without a doubt a powerful tool, but they required way too much preparation. Even after everything, he was probably half a minute away.

How long have you been here? Dallion asked, using his music skills. Knowing it wouldn't be enough to trick them, he then split into twenty instances, performing a new series of point attacks with each.

Black vines sprouted from the male guardians hand, effectively swallowing up every attack. Even if the power was ferocious, splattering the void in all directions, the liquid always managed to pull back and meet the next blow. The only effect that Dallion achieved was to push the dagger guardian back fifty feet.

Vicious. Nosht darted to the tower of the fully reconstructed castle. I see how you managed to defeat Vihrogon.

The same won't work on us, Zdrach joined him. We were told how you fight.

So was he. Dallion threw the harpsisword at them. A thick layer of water covered the weapon as it flew at the tower.

A massive explosion followed, pulverizing the entire part of the structure.

MINOR HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Not waiting for the dust to settle, Dallion summoned his weapon. The harpsisword emerged in his right hand again, ready for combat.

Once again, the guardians seemed unharmed.

He got you? Nosht asked, looking at his twin with a mocking smile.

The attack punched through, she replied. He used spark in the last one.

Splitting and spark already? We must be giving him a hard time.

About twenty-five seconds remained until the completion of the spell. Yet, Dallion could notice that the daggers were unusually calm throughout the whole thing. It was almost as if they were letting him cast his spell. Were they so confident that they could defeat him in less than twenty seconds?

Can you take them, Harp? he asked.

I think so, but I'll get hurt, the nymph replied. It's their realm.

Dallion paused. Despite her strength, void had a far greater effect on her than it did on others. Dallion remembered all the way back to the time he, Veil and Gloria fought crackling mountains in

Nerosal. Harp had received her first and only crack back then, which had scared Dallion to the extreme. Shed barely been wounded since, but he felt reluctant risking her just yet. After all, that might be precisely what the daggers aimed for. While corrupted, they werent their own individuals, not fully. They were still part of the void and it could afford to sacrifice a few pawns in a city full of them, as long as they deprived Dallion from his main advantage.

Oh, right! Nosht shouted. I almost forgot. Im supposed to tell you that the offer for becoming the next Star still stands. Blobs of cruelty emerged throughout his body, visible even through the void. Just say the words and its over. Personally, I hope you refuse.

Fighting on is the right thing to do, after all, Zdrach added. What will those you sacrificed to get here think otherwise? If it wasnt for the greater good, then what was it for?

Youre the worst recruiters ever. Dallion retained his calm.

Weve been called worse. Nosht shrugged. Guess that means the offer is rejected.

Void tendrils shot out of the castle, flying straight for Dallion.

Quickly, he split into two hundred instances, scattering to escape the tentacles reach. In the cases in which he saw that escape wasnt possible, Dallion ended the instance, focusing on the rest. Soon it became obvious that he wasnt the only one using combat splitting. Although neither the guardians nor the tentacles created versions of themselves, they reacted to what Dallion was doing. With each instance that faded away, clusters of void would merge together, moving to the ones that were still present. Likewise, each time a new set of instances would burst into existence, the void would splinter up again.

Spark! Dallion shouted, releasing several line attacks in all directions.

The glowing white lines cut through the void like wire through cheese, but proved far too slow to injure the guardians themselves.

Careful, Vihrogon advised.

What did you notice?

They havent used their vine attacks.

Come to think of it, with the exception of the leaf shield, they hadnt used any of their dryad abilities. It was difficult to tell whether they were still measuring Dallion, or had another reason to be so passive.

I might ask you to join in, Dallion said in his realm.

Fun. Was hoping Id never have to face another dryad again, but if you must.

I wont be killing them! Dallion almost hissed.

In the words of Onda, chill, the dryad laughed. Itll be fine. I needed a stretch anyway. Just one thing to keep in mind. Healing works both ways. Just as you can purge the void, they can use it to corrupt me once more. Or you.

Is that why theyre holding back?

Doubtful. Unlike purging, corrupting takes a while.

That sounded good, but experience had taught Dallion that when someone was overly arrogant, there were only three possibilities: they had a reason to be, they were bluffing, or they were a fool. If nothing else, the twins were definitely not a fool. One of the remaining two options remained, but which?

Alright, Ill bite, Dallion shouted. Just do what youre planning.

Laughter followed.

Youre way too arrogant! the female guardian said. I like you.

Why do you think we have to do anything? the other asked. Youre the one who came here for answers. Its up to you to get them.

All that we have to do is get you.

More tendrils shot out from the castle. This time, they werent aimed at Dallion, but surrounded the space like a spherical cage. In his mind, Dallion could already see it shrinking, constricting his movement further and further until he was captured or forced to exit the realm.

Theres no way it could be that simple, he thought.

Youd be surprised. Vihrogon sighed. Most of us are creatures of habit. Anyone with a bit of imagination quickly rose in the ranks.

Are you sword marshals? Dallion asked.

Like that has-been? No, we were aristocracy. We dined with kings.

At this point, Dallion knew that they were lying. They were masking it very well. Even his music sense wasnt able to spot any inconsistency, yet he had taken the time to read the dryad scrolls from the aura swords hed found, so he knew that there was no such thing as dryad kings. That had been added millennia later by human poets.

Youre lying, he said, his expression becoming cold as a stone mask.

The spells round his aura sword were complete now, creating three silhouettes of purple light nearby. One magic echo would have been enough, but why settle for one if he could go for more?

Light turned to matter as three copies of the noble emerged. By all accounts, the fight was already over. A split second before the spells completion, however, a droplet of void split the air, hitting the echo in the chest.

PERMANENT EFFECT - CORRUPTION SEED

MAGIC ECHO has been affected by corruption, disrupting its magic strings. Unable to use magic until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

As permanent effects went, this was one of the nastier ones. As far as mages were concerned, this was a quick way to limit or even to seal their spellcasting ability. When applied to magic echoes, on the other hand, it was no different than quick poison. Magic echoes were nothing but magic given form.

Several more droplets followed, attempting to strike the remaining echoes. They were quick enough to combat split and fly away casting spells, though that was a temporary solution. Soon enough, the droplets turned into a rain falling inward from the void cage that surrounded the edges of the realm.

Well, what do you think now? Nosht asked with a maniacal smile. You wanted something impressive. There you have it. Our first cultist owner used us to defeat mages. A single wound and their abilities were no more.

Dallion looked at his left hand. The void drops had eaten through all his aether layers of protection and now were spreading through his skin. There was no pain as such, but he could see his magic threads being devoured. There was no change in his magic traits, which suggested the effect wasn't permanent, but merely long lasting. Having to live with a curse for over a year, not to mention a permanently bleeding wound, he had learned the most important thing in such situations never panic.

PERMANENT EFFECT - CORRUPTION SEED

MAGIC ECHO has been affected by corruption, disrupting its magic strings. Unable to use magic until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

PERMANENT EFFECT - CORRUPTION SEED

MAGIC ECHO has been affected by corruption, disrupting its magic strings. Unable to use magic until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

More red rectangles emerged, as the magic echoes he had painstakingly cast were dissolved into nothingness.

I guess I've learned everything I need to know. Dallion closed his eyes.

Magic spark, he thought.

Divine magic exploded through his threads, brought into his body from two Moonstones. Faster than light, they quickly repelled all the void within him, then created a glowing layer around his very skin, evaporating any droplets that tried to go near.

Now it's my turn.

Chapter 826: Music Spark Attack

Music spark attack, Dallion thought as he played a few chords on his harpsisword.

Tendrils of sound shot out in all directions. What they couldn't attach to, they sliced. What they couldn't slice they purged.

With a single set of sounds, the whole area around Dallion became empty of void matter. Another, and the metaphorical bubble of purity doubled in size, allowing him and all his guardians to ignore any corruptive attacks. Once that was settled, he went on the attack.

No one interfere, Dallion ordered his familiars as he cast a speed spell with his aura sword.

Since spark dissolved magic as it did void, he had to switch between the two to make sure the effects of his spells held. As Adzorg would say, it was all a matter of speed. Breaking a flight spell for half a second didnt cause any immediate damage or disruption. And if Dallion could reduce the time he was spell-less even further, it would be as if he hadnt lost anything at all.

You can also stop going all out, dear boy, the mage suggested.

Against void I dont take any chances. Dallion played another chord, this time targeting the twin guardians specifically.

Nosh and Zdrach split up, each flying off in different directions. That didnt help muchthe glowing tendrils of music split after them, each set at their own target.

Black vines emerged from the female guardian, forming a shield of void matter. Several dozen of spark tendrils hit it, letting off steam. One burned its way through, hitting the dagger in the shoulder.

AGGRAVATED STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 100%

The strike wasnt at all bad for a first hit, but Dallion remained displeased. With what he had put in, he was hoping to achieve at least a critical.

Meanwhile, the other guardian changed approach. Instead of a leaf shield, a torrent of void drops flew at Dallion like daggers. In the past, Dallion would have required help and a lot of instances to avoid such an attack. Now, both seemed useless.

Could that be the reason why Euryale didnt resort to splitting so much? Dallion used to think that it was a personal preference, but there was no denying that if one was skilled enough to counter any attack, instances were useless.

Spark music attack! He played his harpsisword again.

The first wave of strands destroyed all the dagger guardians attacks. The second shot right at him.

There was no time for either of the twins to react. Rays of light pierced Zdrach, causing dozens of red rectangles to appear in the air.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

Thats better, Dallion thought, continuing with the next set of cords. A semi victory wasnt a reason to let down his guard. One guardian still remained.

Three shields of void matter sprouted in front of the entity, one after the other, like layers of an onion. Each was drilled full of holes almost the moment it appeared. And with each attack, the distance between the shield and the guardian was pushed further back.

You can always surrender, Dallion said, as he kept on playing. Itll be faster that way.

The pressure was too much for the guardian to even make a sarcastic remark. Unable to maintain three shields, it cut them down to two, then one. Then, even that proved no longer enough.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

CRITICAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

Red rectangles stacked over the other. Just for good measure, Dallion sent out another wave of spark attacks to pierce the already defeated twin.

TWIN DAGGERS Level increased

The TWIN DAGGERS have been improved to AETHER CRYSTAL.

Your MUSIC skills have increased to 81.

The rectangle of victory emerged. Almost out of habit, Dallion had taken the opportunity to manipulate the improvement so as to get the rarest material available in the circumstances. Aether crystal was a new option, but one he readily accepted.

Not bad, he said as the improvement threw him out of the realm and back into the real world. The major difference now was that the blades were glowing in a warm, semi-transparent purple. Any chance you remember anything more about the void? he asked, gently returning the weapons to the box.

Sorry

, Zdrach replied. *We only knew what to expect from you.*

You were way stronger than we were told, Nosht added. Better be careful. The void learns all. The next group that takes you on will be stronger and more prepared.

You werent as strong as Vihrogon, Dallion noted.

True. We werent, but the void we had was.

Dallion closed the box, then looked around where to put it. It was clich having weapons on a bookshelf, but lacking other immediate options, we went with it.

Taem, he opened the door and shouted into the corridor. Bring me some pieces of wood.

Wood, young master? There was just a hint of uncertainty in the servants voice.

I want to practice my carving until the duchess arrives.

Ah. of course, sir. Ill be sure to bring them to the library. Unlike Adzorg, the man didnt dare use any sarcasm.

The next few hours were spent carving various items, occasionally improving them. Like most skills, using carving for the first time was interesting, though after the tenth statue, things were far less amusing. The process was unlike the other skills. The closest one could compare it to was pruning. Back on Earth, a great artist had said that the secret to sculpting was removing all the excess material of an object. If the world had been different, Dallion would have assumed him to be an awakened.

Step by step, his skill rose to twenty, then thirty. Mixing it with attack within the awakening realms, Dallion managed to boost it further to forty-two. Of all the crafting skills, this was the most obviously useful in combat. It didnt take a lot of imagination to use it to skewer an enemy or weaken a weapon by chiseling away at it.

Dallion was just about to get inventive and try something new, when he felt a foreign presence in his domain. It was almost like an invasion, but subtler, as if someone had slid through his realms barrier all the way to his room, without meeting any resistance whatsoever.

Instinctively, he summoned his harpsisword.

As the weapon appeared, so did two unexpected guests. One was the young duchessas he had been warnedand the other an overseer Dallion had never seen before. The new entity was old, white hair held in a ponytail, replacing the standard platinum hair overseers were born with. Unlike most others, his face was completely revealed, displaying a stern expression more suited to an aging principal than a city guardian.

You were expecting someone else? Liya Elazni asked, looking at the pile of wooden objects on the floor.

No duchess, Dallion stood up. I decided to practice my new skill while I waited.

Putting your carving to good use. There have been seven nobles in the capital that sharpened their crafting skill to the absolute limit. The noble made her way to one of the few chairs in the room and sat down. All of them lost their favor. Id advise you to wait for a year or two before following their example.

Duly noted. Dallion turned to the overseer. Interesting way to make an entrance, he said. Who can block someone whos part of the city and everything in it?

Astor used to be my caretaker as a child. His duties have largely diminished since then, but I can still rely on him now and again.

So, you dont trust the rest of the imperial family either, do you? Dallion thought.

Ill get straight to the point. Tors is planning to kill you.

Hardly could such a serious warning be presented in such a casual way. Judging by her tone, one might think that the duchess was discussing going shopping or something of similar nature. There were no emanations of joy or anger coming from her, just a dull boredom that covered whatever other emotions there might be.

Unsummoning his sword, Dallion sat back down in his seat.

Please dont tell me youre surprised, the duchess frowned.

Im surprised that you came to warn me.

I thought I told you. Were better off as allies. Grandma likes you, and you dont have a chance of replacing me. Tors, on the other hand.

Has a chance? Dallion found that hard to believe.

He thinks he has, which is enough for him to try something stupid. Like killing you, for example. He wont do anything direct, of course, nor will he be sloppy as those Mizovy clowns. Itll be just subtle enough to be noticeablea trap that tricks you, thinking you have the upper hand. Possibly an alliance offer or even the promise of information about your grandmother.

Despite his efforts, Dallion didnt manage to keep all his emotions in check. He quickly tried to make up for his mistake, but it was too late.

Definitely information about your grandmother, the duchess nodded, pleased with herself. Whatever it is, ignore it.

Thats all? Something felt wrong. Why tell me and not the duchess?

Grandmas fond of him. If I go to her then at best, hell get a stern talk, and at worst, hell try to come up with some convoluted plot to get back at me. With the outside expansion, now isnt the time for the family to squabble. Im not warning you so you could do anything to him. Im doing it so you ignore him and keep doing what youre doing. As grandma said, youve been given the role of the jester so the real work could be done behind the curtains.

I dont believe you, Lady Elazni, Dallion said in a firm tone. He was fairly certain she hadnt uttered a lie since shed come here, but she wasnt telling him the truth, either.

Good. It means youre getting used to the capital. She stood up. Continue to make contacts, distinguish between allies and enemies, and maybe youll get to blend in, after all.

Before Dallion had the time to respond, the old overseer put his hand on Liyas shoulder and pulled her out of Dallions domain. The room was empty again, leaving him slightly anxious.

Lux, check for echoes. He summoned his bladebow.

While the weapon floated around the room surrounded by blue flames, Dallion cast every spell he knew seeking any unwanted presence. There seemed to be none, which made him even more anxious.

Shes just toying with your mind, dear boy, Adzorg said. Its a common noble tactic.

What does she have to gain?

Might be nothing. For all you know, she might be doing it out of boredom.

That didnt sound like the answer, especially since it had happened so soon after his conversation with the copyette. There was a very real chance that she was a cultist, if not a Star candidate.

I really need to get out of here, Dallion thought.

Unfortunately, as it quickly turned out, leaving the capital was no easy matter. The many golem statues, metalins and bladeres abundant throughout the city werent just a symbol of authority. They

were the best guards magic could create. Nearly impossible to defeat, they were placed at strategic points, ready to react to anything, anywhere in the city. Whoever had originally placed them there was a skilled strategist, creating an invisible cage within the cage. But even if Dallion somehow managed to get past them, he couldn't escape the overseers.

Each time he got remotely close to a city gate, or even the outer wall, one of them would appear. They wouldn't say a word, nor make any threatening actions, just stand there looking at him a reminder that there was no escape without the proper approval.

The only way that remained was the questionable method of the leech Bar, but all the times Dallion tried to get an audience with Duchess Elazni in order to obtain the ring in question, his request was ignored.

He made two subsequent attempts to use the Academy as a means to temporarily loosen his leash, but the archmage was less than charmed, personally taking the time to send a crimson fury with an assurance that the Academy had no need of his assistance and that his previous request was going through the proper channels, whatever that meant.

With no other alternatives, Dallion was left with nothing else to do, but increase his skills and, given his proximity to Count Pilih, subtly purify a few weapons in his collection. Things seemed rather bleak, when a couple of days later, he received two surprises in the same day.

The first came in the form of two swallows flying right into Dallion's mansion. It only took a moment for him to spot that they were, in fact, Gleam and Ruby under an illusion spell. Thanks to her current level, the shardfly's illusion abilities had increased quite a bit, although Dallion strongly suspected they had been allowed to reach him by the city overseers. Either way, he was more than happy to see them.

The second surprise, the very same evening, was an official visit from the envoy of the Stone and Steel Alliance.

Chapter 827: Return of the Envoy

The arrival of the Alliance envoy was treated no differently than an important dignitary who'd come on an incognito visit. Within minutes, everyone seemed to know, but aside from a pair of overseers, no one acted any differently than usual. There were no parades, no official processions in fact, the higher the status of the local nobles, the more they made it a point to remain as far away from her as possible. Only leeches and the servant classes were there to gawk.

According to Dallion's butler, the envoy had an open invitation to the capital as well as the imperial palace. Yet from all the places she could go to, she had chosen to visit him. As much as Dallion was pleased by the fact, he also felt the same embarrassment a teenager would upon being taken from school by their parents.

Officially, no one made a big deal about it. However, Dallion could sense the emotions of curiosity and envy emanating from people of the neighborhood, not to mention he could hear the comments of their item guardians miles away.

That'll be all, Eury said, a quarter of her snakes focusing on Dallion. One of the overseers behind her opened his mouth to make a comment, but was immediately interrupted. Thank you, she added in a harder tone, not even bothering to turn around.

The message was immediately understood as both overseers vanished into the realm of the city.

Nice trick, Dallion smiled.

Were honored by your visit, envoy. Taem quickly stepped to the side of the door, following the proper etiquette for such occasions. Is there anything you require?

Just to see an old friend. Eurys expression remained unchanged.

Dallion made an attempt to read her emotions, but the blocking items she was wearing prevented that.

Of course, my lady. I will see to it that dinner is prepared. The servant bowed again, then stepped outside and moved away, all the time facing the gorgon. Only when he was well on the street did he turn to the side.

Taking her cue, the gorgon entered the mansion and closed the door.

Catchy place, she noted.

Vihrogon built it. It started a small fashion trend that

Before he could finish, he was captured in a passionate embrace. The speed wasnt so impressive that Dallion didnt see it, but this time he had nothing against it.

I really talk too much, he thought as the two finally found themselves alone and together after all that time. In terms of the real world, not even a year had passed. In true time, the number was dozens, but even then, it felt a lot longer.

The lock of the door triggered, as the area guardian knew exactly what was about to follow. Right now, the spark that had emerged all that time ago when they first met in Nerosal blossomed again. In this instant, they werent nobles. It didnt matter that they were members of different world powers, not what the imperial family or the emperor had to say; they were just Dallion and Eurytwo lovers that were star-crossed no more.

Instinctively, Dallion put on his own blocking ring. Some things required absolute privacy.

It was only hours later that he took it off again. By then, Taem had made several attempts to enter the mansion, along with the dinner he had promised. Getting the hint, the servant had thrown the miniature feast which in terms of the imperial city meant giving it to one Bar and some of the other family leeches.

Only when the outer door was unlocked again, he ventured back in with a new apritif. Naturally, he found Dallion and the envoy in the dining room. And, of course, everyone pretended nothing had happened.

Your apritif, envoy and young master, he said, bowing in turn. I wasnt sure what you would prefer, so I took the initiative to get some gorgon spirit.

The drink was transparent, and to Dallions surprise didnt reek of alcohol. The actual presence was subtle, perfect for someone with high perception. Something told him that it was also suited to someone with high strength and endurance as well.

Commendable, Euryale said in a tone that would rival that of Duchess Elazni.

Taem approached and poured her a glass. The moment he turned towards Dallion, though, the baron gestured that he'd pass.

Is it to your liking, envoy?

Yes, it actually is.

In that case, I'll start bringing dinner. The man left the room.

Quite a skill find. Several clusters of snakes turned towards Dallion.

He should be. He was sent by the duchess to keep an eye on me in Nerosal.

The slight quiver of the snakes suggested that was news to the gorgon.

Long story. Why are you here? I doubt it was just to see me.

I got your letter. Why shouldn't I drop by? A smile emerged on her face. But you're right. There's more. I'm here to see the emperor. Things have taken a bad turn.

I knew it. The Azures are active again.

That's precisely it. They aren't.

Hmm?

After Tamins show of power, a third of their cities were destroyed. The rest charged on an all-or-nothing attack against us. In some cases, they even took some territory, pushing us back. While countries had to be buffered to give us a chance to organize.

That was the polar opposite of what was going on in the empire. Dallion knew there was still fighting going on, and that some of the provinces had lost more than they would like to claim. To have entire stretches of land be turned into a buffer zone, though

When? I've only been here for about a week.

War on the front moved fast. Armies are made entirely of awakened. There's been cities that swapped sides three times in a day.

The intensity of combat. Dallion still remembered how it felt in the heat of battle, when five minutes would seem like eternity. Since he'd made his own home, though, it took five times as much just to go and say hello to members of his own newly found family.

Why didn't they go for my mother? The question suddenly hit his mind. The explanation was that she hadn't distinguished herself enough to be of interest and more importantly, of use to Elazni. If true, then the old village chief had done her a favor, of sorts, by sealing her awakening powers. Yet, why hadn't anyone gone to her once her powers had been unsealed?

The Alliance launched a massive attack two days ago, Euryale continued. We breached their defenses in minutes, then reached one of their stronghold cities in the coastal mountains.

It turned out to be a trap?

No. Euryales snakes shuffled. There was no one there.

Dallion didnt immediately respond. His instinct was to say that was a good thing. Yet, he could tell by her reaction that there was more to it.

I had several wings keep watch on the place. Mages too. None of them saw anything worth mentioning.

There are lots of spells and artifacts that could do that. And thats only if they didnt use a tube domain. He paused. Was that why she was here? Youve come to ask for me?

I thought it would be appropriate. Unlike the rest, I know what youve done and what youre really capable of.

Like the good old times?

Chapter 828: Level Check

Youve kept it the same, Euryale said as they walked through Dallions realm.

Dallion had been quick to repair everything he had been delaying before. A new bridge connected the main part of the realm to the Vermillion islands. The embodiment of the new whip blade had a notedly science fiction look, to Ondas delight. The magic thread that Dallion had used to keep the weapons elements together looked like corridors of pure light connecting pillars that rose up from land and sea for miles.

I thought youd change it completely, the gorgon added. I know I changed mine.

There was a time when Dallion would have desperately wanted to venture into Eurys realm. Now, he had grown out of it. He knew precisely how important realms were to domain rulers, yet at the same time he also ignored Adzorgs insistence that he not invite Eury into it.

Hes nothing if not reliable to resist change. A crystal haired woman approached. She was wearing a standard set of adventurers clothes more dryad fashioned than human and had a large crimson sparrow on her shoulder. Until he makes up for it.

Those with a high magic trait would be able to see that not only the womans beauty, but her very shape was nothing but a well-crafted illusion. Expanding multiple times beyond, it was a far more magnificent shape of an adult shardfly with a wing-span exceeding twenty feet. That wasnt the only being using illusion, though. The crimson sparrow was also, in fact, a shardfly, though its illusion left a lot to be desired.

Thats Gleam, Dallion quickly said. And Ruby.

Ruby? The gorgons snakes twitched. Does he still draw on the walls?

The sparrow flapped its wings, its body filling with a large bubble of embarrassment.

Ive grown a lot since then, it murmured.

Are those the Moonstones? Euryale turned in the direction of the massive green and purple crystals. You really have moved up a lot.

Both of us have. A flicker of guilt passed through Dallions mind. The stone orchid was yet to blossom. Not only that, but it remained at the Academy, and would likely stay there for a while. Whats the plan? It was better to deal with the business matters first.

Same as always. Several snakes turned Dallions direction. I already told you.

Dallion could feel that not to be precisely true. The gorgons skills had also grown to the point that she could control her emotions flawlessly, even when not wearing a blocker item. But it was her lack of emotion that told him something was not right.

How about a quick spar? she asked. Just like before?

Thought youd never ask.

A massive arena rose up in the middle of the sea . In many aspects, it was a copy of the arena back in Nerosal, from the massive walls to the inner rooms and the stands. The only difference was that it was completely empty.

Too much? Dallion thought.

Nah, Vihrogon replied. Everyone likes massive feats of architecture. Of course, now youve raised the expectations.

Lux, Dallion said.

The firebird popped up in a ball of blue flames, chirping with enthusiasm.

Youll be with Eury on this one.

No magic? The gorgon asked, letting the firebird engulf her.

I am magic, big sis!

The firebird protested.

Of course, you are. There was no other way to respond to that.

Lifted by Lux, the gorgon flew towards the arena. Casting a flight spell, Dallion followed soon after. He was quickly joined by Gleam and Lux, who returned to their normal shardfly form.

Finished everything you set out to do? Dallion turned to his familiar.

Was there any doubt? Gleam replied, confident as ever. Dont be surprised if I can take you on at this stage.

That was likely true. Dallion felt that he could win, but if he was to stand a chance against more powerful opponents, hed have to start gaining levels again.

Want me to give you a hand? the shardfly whispered.

No. I need to check my level.

I can tell you that right now. Youll lose.

A level difference of twenty separated them. There was a time when it would be insurmountable. However, many of Dallions traits exceeded hers. Even as an otherworlder, she remained a gorgon, which made the limitations obvious on higher levels.

Even with magic, Gleam added, in case there was any doubt.

Guess well find out.

The two landed in the middle of the combat field, fifty feet apart. A few seconds after they did, Lux flew off Euryale, returning to Dallion.

I take it you want hand to hand? Dallion asked.

I dont want to shatter your realm, the gorgon replied. Alright, not shatter. Damage.

As much as that sounded like a boast, Dallion felt it wasnt. It would have been a lot better if he could see her trait and skill levels, but despite all attempts, the gorgon was wearing some item that hid all of them. The only thing visible on her white rectangle were her name and lots of question marks.

Challenge accepted, then, he said. Ill make sure that no echoes are nearby.

What did I tell you about expectations? Vihrogon asked. I know its been a while and you want to prove what a man youve become, but seriously? Fighting a gorgon noble in the middle of your realm is probably your third worst idea yet.

She wont harm me.

Oh, yes, she will. And itll be humiliating if she ended up conquering your realm by accident.

The comment was supposed to be mildly amusing, but it sent a shiver down Dallions spine. He knew with absolute certainty that she wasnt a copyette, and still in the back of his mind a voice asked, what if she turned out to be? If anyone had a monopoly on ancient artifacts, it wasnt the Academy anymore, but the Order of the Seven Moons.

How about we make it interesting? Dallion asked. Both of us go all out. You dont have to worry about my realm, but if I win, you tell me what youre hiding.

Are you sure? Eurys casual tone vanished. Youve only seen me go out once.

Thats the only way I know youll tell me what youre really thinking.

The sound of the waves was the only thing that filled the air.

Ill only use Harp and Vihrogon as weapons, Dallion went on. Ill use everything else, Magic, familiars, even the realm itself.

Youre really set on this.

Dallion nodded. I want to get a taste of what Ill be facing.

If thats what you want. Euryales clothes blossomed, turning into full gorgon armor.

Dallion recognized the modelit was the same sun gold set she had taken from the hunters den in Lanitol. Some would say it was a bad choice, since her current position allowed her to acquire far more exotic sets, but Dallion knew that for someone like her, that was the best match. Sun gold ensured that an item grew along with the skills of its owner, and Euryale had grown a lot.

Just one slight change, she said. At every clean hit, Ill tell you a part of what Ive been keeping from you. Five or six hits and youll know it all.

Still going easy on me? Dallion summoned his weapons. Three blades, two daggers, a bladebow, a hammer, and the armadil shield emerged around him, floating inches away from his body. Thanks to his spellcraft skills, he no longer needed to have them attached.

Now it looks like youre compensating for something, Vihrogon whispered, forcing a chuckle out of Dallion.

All familiars, with the exception of Ruby, had disappeared, taking on their weapon form. Gem emerged shortly after, floating about.

Sit this one out, Gem, Dallion said. Having an aether creature be near an arena where spells and spark would clash wasnt a terribly good idea.

The familiar floated about a bit longer, then blinked out of the area. With that, Dallions final preparation was complete.

Ready? he asked Euryale.

Almost. The gorgon leapt in the air. Upon reaching fifty feet, a magic portal appeared in the air.

Instinctively, Dallion observed the magic threads, reading the instructions. As he suspected, the portal was a doorway into his realm, but it wasnt cast by Euryale. The nature of the threads was too different from anything on her. The spell was coming from outside, but at the same time no red rectangles warning of a realm invasion had emerged.

A bulk of green suddenly filled the empty space, like an airbag after a car crash; a very scaly green with wings, claws, and a massive tail and neck.

Dark? Dallion wondered. Clearly, he wasnt the only one who had learned new spells.

The dragon flapped its wings, letting Euryale land on the base of its neck. Then, without delay or hesitation, it spat out a torrent of wind at him.

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion instantly responded, grabbing the aura sword with his left hand. Magic threads spread through the weapon as he performed a line attack.

ATTACK NEGATED

DARKs wind attack has been sliced in two.

Attack has no effect.

Easier than the twins, Dallion said as he reached for the harpsisword. Before he could grab it, the whip blade moved on its own, shoving the other weapon out of the way.

My turn, Gleam said, brimming with confidence and eagerness. Been millennia since Id seriously fought a dragon.

The time spent without the spectral shardfly had made Dallion forget how combative she was, even among her own species. He also knew that Harp was both strong and fast enough to prevent the familiar from forcing itself in her place. Even now she was still guiding him, carefully observing Dallions progress.

Alright then. Dallion grabbed the hilt. Time for something new.

Metal segments shot off, connected only by a thread of magic. Dallion twisted his wrist with a firm action, causing them to form a spiral. At that point, he performed a point attack straight forward.

A circle of force shot forward, slamming into the dragon, then continuing on.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Sparks and scales filled the air as the rest of the attack went on, slicing through the stands and wall of the arena behind it.

Maintaining his momentum, Dallion slashed the air again, while casting multiple speed and armor spells with the aura sword.

The green dragon split into three dozen instances, all flying off in different directions. Three of them charged right at Dallion, only to fade away, leaving just one behind.

Still relying too much on splitting, Dallion said, forcing the instance he wanted to become reality. His opponent had made an attempt to push back, but it was still far from enough.

Twisting like a top, Dallion let out six line attacks, all aimed at Dark and his rider. His aim was to provoke Euryale into reacting, and she didnt disappoint.

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by EURYALE

Attack has no effect

Six red rectangles appeared one after the other. The terrifying part was that Dallion had barely managed to see the counterattack. The gorgon wasnt using a weapon in the fight. The gauntlets of her armor had changed form, allowing her to achieve the same effect as if she were.

Origami armor? The moment he thought of it, Dallion quickly pulled back, but it was already too late. Even after all this time, he had made the same stupid mistake acting on assumptions. Just because Eury didnt have magic and chose to fight atop of a dragon didnt mean she couldnt fly, just that she had chosen not to.

Wings of sun gold sprouted from her back, as the gorgon darted forward, straight at her target. Meanwhile, Dark flew up in order to claim air superiority.

Spreading magic through both swords, Dallion cast multiple barrier spells in front of him, only to watch Euryale shatter them like glass.

Shield! Dallion shouted, while causing the entire arena ground to abruptly rise up.

If he were in Eurys place, the next attack would be a point attack from immediate proximity. Even if not fatal, it would put him on the defensive. Thats why he had to

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

Two tendrils of sun gold twisted on either side of the shield, striking Dallion in the right leg and left shoulder.

Chapter 829: The Duchess' Disapproval

Ignoring the pain, Dallion ripped out the tendrils and flew back. In the real world, this would have been the end. Actually, it might have been the end here as well if Euryale was fighting seriously. She had promised not to pull any punches, but if she had let the tendril spike up while in his body the damage would have been a lot more severe.

As the shield floated to the ground, walls of rock shot up from the ground, surrounding Dallion on all sides. One of them quickly shattered due to external impact, though it was immediately replaced by another.

Lets see you play with this, Dallion thought as he directed a series of stone spikes to raise from the ground. Concentrating on his magic vision, he could see the gorgons magic glow through his stone bunker. As expected, the spikes presented no threat whatsoever, but they werent meant to be. All that Dallion needed was a breather to cast a healing spell on himself.

Lux, he said, calmly waving his aura sword. Ill need your help, buddy.

The firebird emerged a foot away from him.

Yes, boss? it chirped.

Im leaving the healing to you, Dallion said. Just the healing. Leave the flying and fighting to me.

A small blob of disappointment appeared in the firebirds body. No doubt it was itching to show off in front of its owner. Still, healing was better than nothing, so the creature flew right into the man, surrounding him with blue flames.

Get behind me, shield, Dall

Gripping both weapons, Dallion made a full circular strike with his aura sword. Three dozen spell circles formed, after which the walls of stone exploded. Driven by the force of the realm itself, they flew in all directions as large blocks. The ones that approached Eury exploded again into smaller chunks, then again.

A rail of pebbles propelled by magic and Dallions realm control poured onto the gorgon like heavy hail. Parts of her armor extended to shield her from the blow, but even that wasnt enough to stop the pure force of the attack.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Thats the spirit! Gleam shouted.

The shardfly was having fun facing the dragon. In terms of raw power, she was far inferior to Dark, but her illusion abilities allowed her to have the upper hand. Like a sheet of paper wrapping herself around a blunt weapon, she took on attacks with no damage, while inflicting thousands of small paper cuts.

Don't lose the advantage, Vihrogon said, resuming his dryad form on the ground.

Never planned to, Dallion flew forward, incessantly casting spells in the process.

While not individually powerful, they combined all aspects of magic Dallion could think of in his attempt to find the gorgon's weakness. Lightning, fire, water, ice, clouds all elements struck her, and still none managed to do anything whatsoever.

Suddenly, Dallion spotted a new line attack flying his way. Instantly, he responded.

ATTACK NEGATED

EURYALE's line attack has been sliced in two.

Attack has no effect.

Moments after the red rectangle appeared, it was shattered by Euryale, who flew through, attacking Dallion with her armor tendrils.

Deflecting the attacks with both weapons, Dallion tried to take advantage of the situation to gain a guard bonus. Just before he could complete a sequence, though, he felt a sharp pain in his left calf.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

Not again! Dallion struck the piece of sun gold, pulling it out of his leg through the strength of his blow.

You still can't maintain your distance, Euryale said, charging right at him.

Before she could reach him, a pack of cublings emerged on Dallion, each leaping at her, claws extended. Nox had taken the initiative, catching Euryale completely by surprise.

A single moment of hesitation slowed her movements. She had the skill and speed to slice each and every crackling flying at her, but instead of doing so, the gorgon suddenly vanished, leaving Dallion's realm.

Huh? Dallion blinked.

His immediate reaction was to cast a new series of defensive spells, in preparation for a sudden sneak attack. However, even before finishing, he could sense that she was no longer there.

That was anticlimactic. Gleam kept on fighting. Neither she nor Dark were in the least concerned that the main fight which they were only assisting in had ended.

Yeah anticlimactic, Dallion repeated.

There was no apparent logic to Euryale's action. She could have won even if she hadn't harmed Nox, unless she had a type of attack that Dallion didn't know about.

Harp, what do you think? Dallion asked.

You had lost, the nymph said. She had come in close enough to finish you off. You wouldnt have stopped her.

It wasnt what Dallion wanted to hear, but at least it was a realistic description of events. Unlike his previous spars with the gorgon, he had a good idea what was going on, even if overwhelmed. That meant that reaching her wasnt impossible as long as he found a way to raise his traits a bit more.

Gleam, Dark, youve had your fun.

Both creatures stopped mid strike. With Eury gone, both acknowledged Dallion as the strongest entity in the realm. Dark was more eager to continue, since he had something to prove to Gleam as well as Dallion.

Next time, the shardfly said, knowing what the dragon felt.

Yeah, right Dark flapped his wings, then slammed them together, vanishing in a flash of light.

A faint breeze swept through the realm. It had seen destruction several times before, but the results of a friendly spar were as devastating as Euryale had warned it would be. Pieces of landscape were scattered all about, broken wall pieces still stuck up from the ground, and that wasnt even taking into account all the line attack damage.

Leaving the cleanup to Gen, Dallion left the realm back for the real world, where Euryale was waiting.

Not bad, she said, as if nothing had happened. You still need more practice for close combat, but youve got a good start.

What happened?

Euryales snakes moved about.

You were winning.

Nox caught me by surprise. I didnt want to hurt him. Something in her tone suggested that wasnt the entire truth. Still, a promise is a promise. Im here to discuss a closer alliance with Emperor Tamin.

Makes sense. Gryms still out there and

Its not against Grym, the gorgon interrupted. Not, exactly. You managed to kill a battle mage as he was casting his summoning spell. The emperor took care of the rest afterwards. He wasnt the only mage, though.

You think they summoned more nymphs?

There are no signs of it so far, but its possible. A lot of power was drained from the vortex fields, and it certainly wasnt used to level up mages. If there are more nymph forts out there, well need the emperors weapons to face them.

Which brings us close to the prophecy, Dallion didnt dare say out loud. Could it be that Euryale was the key of doom after all? If there were more nymphs out

there and she managed to convince Emperor Tamin on an even larger scale, what would that cause for the rest of the world? Several parts of it had already been reduced to class. Would more follow?

You understand now, don't you? Eury placed her hand on Dallion's cheek.

Just like in my dream he thought.

I'm truly hoping that it never comes to that, but if the nymphs are truly back, they could sweep through all the remaining forces of the world and no one would be able to stop them.

Copyettes, void weapons, and now nymphs. Neither option seemed remotely good. Just as Dallion was about to share his recent discoveries, the door to the room opened. Normally, it would be Taem would enter, bringing food, refreshments, and whatnot. This time, a host of eight sky silver metalins marched in, forming two columns on either side of the entrance. Each of them was polished to perfection and had the Elazni crest etched on their breastplates.

Welcome to the capital, Envoy, the young overseer that Dallion knew far too well said with a slight bow. Duchess Elazni cordially invites you to join her for dinner.

Everyone knew that food wasn't the goal of the invitation.

The baron, the boy gave Dallion a brief glare, can accompany you, if you so choose.

Thank the duchess for her understanding. The gorgon replied, the snakes on her head perfectly still.

The sentence was all it took to get the envoy to spring into action. Dallion felt a realm bubble appear around the room. To any internal observer, nothing had changed. Everyone remained where they were in Dallion's dining room. In reality, they were moving through the city at this very moment. The overseer was using his powers to transform the domain of the capital and slide their immediate surroundings out of Dallion's house, through the neighborhood, and all the way up to the imperial castle.

Please, the overseer took a step back, inviting the gorgon to leave the room.

Dallion followed a few steps behind. He already recognized the corridor they were walking in to he himself had been there quite recently.

Two rows of metalins and bladerers were arranged along the walls, leading to the duchess dining room. The massive door was already open, making it clear how much superior it was to the one the two had just exited.

No one asked any of them to put on blocker items as they entered it wasn't necessary, since the only living person in the room was the duchess herself.

Dallion glanced over his shoulder to see what the overseer was doing and noticed that the boy was no longer there. Not only that, but the entrance to his dining room had also vanished.

I really hope you put it back where you took it from, Dallion thought. It was going to be really annoying if the little punk decided to play a joke on him and dropped off his room elsewhere in the capital.

Duchess, Euryale said, bowing her head as she crossed the rooms threshold. Im flattered by your attention.

Since my great-grandson had already welcomed you to the capital, I thought Id follow suit, the old noble replied. We must maintain war relations with our allies, after all.

The music attacks within her words were apparent. The duchess wasnt pleased with the envoys visit, and far less so with Dallions involvement, for that matter.

I understand that the war is nearly over, isnt it? She continued.

That is precisely what Ive come to discuss with the emperor. Eury didnt let herself be intimidated in the least. There are certain details that need to be ironed out.

Really? Duchess Elazni raised her chin slightly. Maybe I could help with ironing out those details.

Im sure you would, but its a matter for the main imperial family.

Pressure filled the air. Dallion felt the sudden discomfort of presenting his fiance to his family for the very first time. Only a few moments had passed and both women already hated each other. By the looks of things, it was possible that they hated each other long before this meeting. There had to be a lot of politics involved that Dallion hadnt been privy to.

In that case, let one of my metalins show you the way to the small library, the duchess said. You can find the emperor there around this time.

Thats most gracious of you. The gorgon raised her head. I think Ill take advantage of your generosity.

Dont let me stop you. Ill have a chat with my great-grandson while you do.

Internally, Dallion couldnt help but feel impressed. This was the most impressive, passively-aggressive verbal duel he had seen his entire life. None of the snobbery at the Academy even came close. It wasnt just words that had clashedthat would be amateurish. Every pause, every shift in intonation was deliberately placed. Furthermore, the duchess had placed quite the subtle cocktail of emotions in her voice, aimed at making the gorgon feel uncomfortable.

With a deliberate twirl of her snakes, Euryale turned around, walking back into the corridor. She was soon accompanied by a massive metalin who led the way. Dallion, though, remained behind.

I expect youre having fun? she asked in a tone that combined disappointment and condemnation all in one.

I am engaged to her, Duchess, Dallion said.

Dallion Darude was. As Dallion Elazni, I dont want you to have anything to do with the gorgon empress!

Chapter 830: Grandfather's Fall

Gorgon Empress? After spending years of real-world time with her, Dallion was pretty sure he was familiar with most of her family history. There didnt seem to be any love lost between her and her local parents, but they definitely werent royalty or even nobility. It was her otherworldly parents that were such. Could it be that was what the duchess was referring to? She definitely wasnt an otherworlder herself, that was for sure, though maybe she had some knowledge on the matter.

Empress? Dallion asked.

Shes the battle leader of the Alliance, the woman said, adding a sensation of guilt with her music skills. If there are three people that could be considered the rulers of the entire group, shes one of them.

Dallion was about to say that he considered that a good thing for the family, when he suddenly saw it. Flaunting his relation with her might be viewed as him making a claim for the Elazni House. He wasnt anywhere close in the competition for heir that wasnt something he, or anyone else, wanted. Yet, by blood and skill, he was still viewed as a distant possibility. And even if it were to somehow get resolved internally without a lot of fuss, there was the larger matter at hand. Elazni, although powerful, was not the main imperial family. Some might view this as a power play and a challenge to the throne, and many more would use this as a pretext to cause trouble.

Maybe it was a mistake joining the Elazni, after all, Dallion thought.

You think Im using her to escape the cage, Dallion said, and in a way, it was true. The lack of emotions emanating from the duchess made it impossible for him to tell whether that was the case. You think shes using me to get to the emperor? he suggested. Shes not.

Just because Im the head of the Elazni doesnt mean I cant think of anything other than the status. Why do you think no one else is here? Many would love to be on a first name basis with the envoy. A dozen high-ranking nobles in the capital have even made courting attempts. Thats not the issue. I dont want to see history repeat. For the slightest of moments, the womans shield cracked, allowing a flicker of sadness to slip through. I dont want to see you go through what my daughter did.

Dallion remained silent. He hadnt even considered that. Nobles were so different from ordinary people that they could be considered a different breed altogether. It was so easy to forget that they could have standard values as well, such as being afraid for their family.

I made a vow not to discuss what happened to your mother, the duchess continued. However, Im free to discuss some details about that man, your grandfather.

You dont like him much, do you?

I utterly despise him, but thats not the point. He was pretty much the exact copy of youan awakened from an insignificant village in the middle of nowhere. Also, he was an otherworlder. At the time, that was viewed in a slightly more positive way than now.

Dallion took that to mean that there were more of them walking about.

He went to a Nerosal, where he took part in a war of little significance.

Given that war determined the archduke of Lanitol province, Dallion strongly disagreed.

During that conflict, he and his friend showed enough skill to be recognized by the local archduke and he even rose to become a minor noble himself. Then he made his first mistake.

He decided to go to the capital, Dallion said.

Insisted, Duchess Elazni corrected. Once the archdukes authority over his domain was reestablished, he was summoned to an audience by the emperor. Your grandfather was not even mentioned. He was too insignificant to be allowed anywhere close, yet his outstanding wins during

the war had made it impossible for the archduke to ignore. He and his friend were allowed to accompany the archduke as servants.

That didnt sound like Dallions grandfather at all. The old man had been ambitious, though not the type to abuse his achievements. Then again, Dallion had only seen a fragment of his memory. Had victory turned him arrogant?

Old man. Dallion sighed internally. Did you have everyone fooled all along?

Thinking back, there was one person who his grandfather had manipulated Veil and Glorias grandmother. It had been subtle, but he had convinced her to forsake part of her humanity and turn into a chainling, possibly knowing full well the feelings she had towards him. Dallion didnt doubt the old mans regret, he had felt it within the memory; however, that had been the first time. As the saying went, things get easier with each repetition.

He came here? Dallion asked.

The duchess shook her head.

He didnt have the status to get anywhere close to the imperial palace. Because of his friend, the two of them were allowed to stay in the overseer district until it was time for the archduke to leave. A heavy frown appeared on the womans face, like cracks on marble. One full day. Thats all the time they had and all it took to lead to the second greatest mistake he made marrying above his station without any regard for the consequences.

Dallion felt a lump form in his throat.

Your grandfather believed himself so smart. The womans eyes narrowed further. He thought he had foreseen everything. His archduke left, but he remained. A week later, everyone knew who he fancied. A week after, it was made official. The duchess closed her eyes. The banishment happened a year later to the day.

Unpleasant coincidence, Dallion managed to say.

It wasnt a coincidence. Plans had been set in motion months before that. The she hesitated, parties involved wanted to make sure he had a child before they proceeded. They made sure that everyone from the family was there to watch. Even my father.

You werent the head of the family back then?

I was, in a manner of speaking. The duchess eyes snapped open as she returned to her usual cold self. I ran most matters, but the old duke was officially the head. You can say it was the same relationship Im having with Liya right now. She still needs a decade or so, but shell take on the role. No doubt about it.

So much for Tors trying to claim the spot. That wouldnt stop him from trying, but the duchess mind was clearly made.

Thats when he was cast out? Dallion asked.

Not just one. There were dozens thrown out of the capital. Dont bother trying to find out who. No one remembers at this point. The banishment was pretty thorough. It was as if it never happened.

That sounded like the Order in action. It was still outright scary how they could wipe out someone from existence. Dallions grandfather must have pissed off a number of high-level nobles in order to get such a punishment. But, in that case, why

It suddenly hit Dallion. The only people who remembered the banished were close friends and family. Everyone considered that to be fact. But was it really true? Somehow, nobles and people of significance were more remembered than others. It stood to logic that they would be more famous, but that wasnt supposed to matter as far as banishment was concerned. As Adzorg had said a long time ago, every mention of their name even in books was erased from existence. Clearly, that wasnt the case.

You still remember, Dallion said. And youre not the only one.

Of course, I would. Despite the shame, my family was important, more important than now even. The Order knew doing us a favor would be to their advantage, so they allowed for a few exceptions.

So, that was it. You sold out to the Order of the Seven Moons, Dallion thought.

We werent the first to do it and we wont be the last, the duchess went on. One of several, as far as your mother was concerned, and you after her.

You didnt keep an eye on us directly. Dallion resisted the urge to cross his arms. You asked the Order to do it for you.

A bad choice, but one I had to make. I just dont want to make it again.

You think Im aiming too high?

Isnt it obvious? If she had remained a mercenary, your relation with her would have been viewed as scandalous, but accepted. Now, if you dont put an end to things, youll end up like your grandfather.

There was no way that could happen. Dallion had already defeated that fear during an awakening trial, ages ago. Despite the similarities, he had magic and empathytwo traits that his grandfather lacked.

I take it thats my only warning? Dallion asked in defiance. Good intentions or not, he had no intention of leaving something else to live his life.

Just like him. The duchess shook her head. You probably think that you have a better sense of things, that you can see what your grandfather couldnt. No matter. This time, I wont allow history to repeat.

I see.

It was clear that the duchess would try, but her word wasnt above that of the emperor. As long as Euryale managed to convince Emperor Tamin to send Dallion on another mission in relation to the war, there wasnt anything anyone could do.

Thanks, gran, Dallion cursed mentally. There were still too many pieces missing from the story. This was the last way in which he wanted to learn of his past.

Is she alive, at least?

The duchess looked to the side.

Please tell me at least that.

Who knows? Maybe she is, maybe she isn't. You'll have to ask the archbishop for that.

I damned plan to, Dallion hissed internally.

The conversation was over. The duchess had said everything she wanted and Dallion had no intention of hearing more. Two metalins made their way up to him, stopping a few feet on either side. Dallion turned around to be escorted out of the room. Halfway, he stopped.

I heard that the domain rulers of the family are given emblem rings, Dallion said, changing the subject completely.

You heard wrong. Only those trusted enough were allowed to have them.

Were? Dallion didn't like the sound of that.

They're just a trinket now. I suppose one of the lower relations asked that you bring them for one reason or another. The woman allowed herself a sigh. It's been over a century since they had any significance. Still, I have no intention of just giving them out like that for no reason.

Isn't trusting me enough, Duchess?

If I give it to you, will you vow to end your relationship with the Gorgon Empress and never see her again?

Dallion remained still and silent.

I didn't think so. Then again, what can I do? Age tends to make a person sentimental. She raised her left hand slightly.

An overseer emerged behind her the same platinum blond boy that had brought Eury and Dallion here.

Bring me the emblem ring, she ordered. The small one.

The overseer disappeared with a nod.

Should I ask what you plan on doing with it? The duchess glanced at Dallion.

Hopefully, brighten someone's day for a bit, he replied.

Just make sure they don't swap it for alcohol. It will save Tors the pleasure of reclaiming it.

Once again, that was one of the more elegant threats Dallion had heard. If there was one skill he wanted to learn from his new family, that was it.

Of course, Duchess. I'll make sure of it.

The overseer returned a few moments later, appearing in the same fashion as before. Gently, he placed an ornate sky silver box in front of the duchess, then stepped back.

The emblem rings, the woman said as she removed the cover. It's claimed that they were a pair, but in truth there's five of them, created at different times by different jewelers. The first is said to have

belonged to the emperor himself before he gave it to his wife. A ring of true love that later became our crest.

The story was without doubt fascinating, if one was interested in ancient imperial heraldry. However, upon seeing the contents of the box, Dallion felt a cold chill pass through him. He could see a thin black thread emerging from the piece of jewelry, disappearing in the air.

A void item, he thought. One of the House Elazni heirlooms is a void item?!