

## Leveling up 831

### Chapter 831: The Overseer's Quarter

Is everything alright, young master? Taem asked.

Dallion didnt respond. Ever since returning from the imperial palace he had been sitting in his study, staring at the sky silver box the duchess had given him. Things hadnt turned out at all as he expected. With the return of Gleam and Eury he had thought he could see light at the end of the tunnel, only to have it abruptly closed off with violent force.

The fake March was rightthe city was a den of void corruption. No wonder that the empire couldnt succeed in their battle against the Star cultsthe source of that corruption originated from the very heart of the empire. If he hadnt seen the emperor in person, Dallion would have thought that Tamin was a high-ranking member of the cult hierarchy, possibly another Star in the making.

Young master? Taem asked again. Would you like me to bring more pieces of wood for your training?

Hmm? Oh, yes, that would be nice. Thanks. Dallion replied absentmindedly. Taem, could you organize another party?

That would be a splendid idea, sir. Ill make sure that the people involved are of higher caliber than last time.

No, actually, Id like you to invite the exact same people, Dallion clarified. Especially Ber.

Ber, sir? Surprise emanated from the servant. If youre sure.

Yes. And send him here when he arrives. Dallion looked up. Alone.

Of course, sir.

Dallion spent a few minutes carving, boosting his skill a few levels more, but his mind wasnt into it. Somehow, the capitals allure had managed to affect even him. The backing of an imperial house, the promise of details relating to his mother, even the notion that he could carve out a realm of his own in this place, had made him ignore the rest of the world.

Looking at it from the side, it was as if his life had been put on pausea glamorous vacation from reality that came with its own set of challenges and issues. It was almost as if he had entered a realm, but unlike any awakened realm, this one didnt cause time to stop.

After eight carved items, Dallion decided he had had enough. His carving skill had reached fiftygood enough should he enter a serious fight. Anything more than that could wait.

For the first time in his life, he felt like the leeches couldnt arrive fast enough.

You can always just purify it, dear boy, Adzorg suggested.

That wasnt entirely true. Family non-combat heirlooms were among the things that were better left as they were. If a weapon were to be improved, that would be a mark of strengthachieving something past generations couldnt. If he were to improve the ring, on the other hand, he would have destroyed the items significance.

The ring is just a symptom, Dallion replied.

*Possibly, but itll at least put your mind at ease.*

That was one way of looking at it.

Thanks, Nil. Dallion went back to the desk. When Vihrogon had created the room, he had deliberately made it windowless. That way, the outside wouldnt distract Dallion. It was a good decision, although right now Dallion wouldnt have minded spending a while looking at the sky. And how has the emperor been treating you?

*Oh, I cant complain. I got my hands healed, which is always a plus. Now and again, Im even allowed to join the emperor in the garden.*

Oh?

*Sorry, dear boy. Moon vow. Everything spoken in the garden will remain there.*

Everything in the garden remains in the garden, Dallion said.

Interesting if the same could be said about Adzorg. The mage the real one, not the echo within Dallions realm that he changed places with remained a prisoner. In theory, the emperor had promised to give him to Dallion after the successful completion of the task, but that had yet to occur. On that note, Dallion was yet to be summoned by the ruler again. Apparently, now that the crisis was seemingly averted, the emperor had lost interest in him.

A minute later, the leeches started arriving. Dallion had no idea who the first ones were, nor was he interested in finding out. He could hear the laughter coming from the lower floors. One had to admire Taems skills. He managed to fulfill any request and do it so seamlessly that one would swear he had planned it all along.

With every minute, the noise grew louder and louder. Finally, at one point, Dallion heard the sound of steps making their way up to the second floor. Not long after, there was a knock at the door.

Your guest has arrived, young master, Taem said from the outside.

Let him in, Dallion ordered.

The door opened, and Ber stepped inside. The noble was dressed in a new set of clothes: a sapphire thread shirt, onyx trousers, and a peculiar set of basilisk scale shoes. As usual, he was holding a large glass of alcohol, sipping from it as he entered.

Dal, he nodded between sips. Like the shoes? Fresh stock from the wilderness. Hunters came in earlier today. Most of the good things were already taken, but I used a few tricks to

You promised you could get me out of the capital, Dallion interrupted. Even if he couldnt sense the lies with his music skill, he didnt have time for this.

Bers expression abruptly changed.

I promised Id try, he corrected. Provided you give me one of the house emblem rings.

Strangely enough, there were no comments regarding Euryale. There was no way that Ber, of all people, wasnt aware. Duchess Elazni must have made it clear that she didnt want any mention of the story, at least among family members.

The emblem ring.

Dallion reached down. Instead of opening the sky silver box on the desk, though, he took one of his recent carvings. With his hands hidden from the others sight, Dallion quickly cast an illusion spell, transforming the worthless object into a perfect replica of the heirloom. As far as anyone was concerned, it was the actual item; with the amount of detail Dallion had put into the spell, only a mage would be able to tell it was a fake.

Here, Dallion tossed the item to Ber.

Astonishment and joy emanated from the man.

You really Ber wasnt able to finish his sentence, looking at the item as if it had supernatural qualities. You got an emblem ring?

You can be really nasty, you know that? Gleam said from Dallions realm.

*Its better for him.*

How?

Does it matter? Dallion flashed a confident smirk. I asked the duchess nicely, and she gave it. As long as you dont sell it for booze, well be fine.

Sell it? Ber breathed on the ring then polished it into his shirt. Dont worry. I wont.

Good. Now, time for your part of the bargain.

Now? Annoyance mixed with green bubbled to the surface. Why waste the party? Lets have a few drinks, a bite or two, have a chat with The mans voice trailed off at the sight of Dallions expression. Can I finish my drink, at least?

Im not a monster, Dallion said as he passed by, tapping Ber on the shoulder. Take it with you.

The solution was not one Ber would have preferred, but he clearly wasnt given the option. Without paying any attention to his guests, Dallion left his mansion, followed reluctantly by his distant relative. No one in the crowd paid them any attention. As much as one could blame the area guardian, that tended to be just the nature of the guests.

Things changed on the streets. While most of the people had gotten used to Dallion, the lifeless guardians of the capital were observing him with increased interest. Golems, metalins, and bladerers would turn his direction, making it known that the emperor was keeping an eye. They didnt approach him, nor did they follow, only kept on watching.

Dont worry about it, dear boy, Adzorg said. Just an appropriate reaction to your recent guest.

I thought the emperor knew everything, Dallion responded.

*He does, but he must also be seen as knowing everything. Itll die down soon enough, have no worry.*

Easier said than done. Euryale was still in the imperial palace, which was longer than any audience with the emperor Dallion knew of. Likely she had been offered to stay there for the night, and given her position within the alliance, she had no choice but to accept.

Where are we going exactly? Dallion asked.

Overseer quarter, Ber replied. Its a bit out of the way, so it will take a while.

Sure thing, Dallion replied. It wasnt the first time he had heard the overseer quarter be mentioned, but he had yet to be there personally. Come to think of it, he didnt remember seeing the place. Out of curiosity, he tried prying information from the local guardians area and item alike only to receive silence.

Ber kept on walking with his usual confidence. Every now and again, hed take a random turn, continuing with no rhyme or reason. There didnt seem to be any destination in mind, just walking, turning, and more walking. After close to half an hour, Dallion was able to notice what was really going on. The reason they werent going towards a specific destination was because they werent walking on the streets; rather, they were following the mosaic-nature of the area domains within the city, never going through the same one twice.

Were walking through a maze, Dallion noted.

I guess you can call it that. Ber shrugged. Its no big secret, just most people dont bother to learn it. Anyone important is automatically invited there. Mind you, anyone important wouldnt be caught dead in the overseers quarter.

To them, they were just another batch of servants, Dallion thought.

Twenty more minutes, the pair kept on walking through the invisible maze, until they finally reached a spot that Dallion hadnt seen before. He knew his exact position in the citythe imperial palace and the wall towers were clearly visiblejust not his immediate surroundings. It was as if he had stumbled upon an area that didnt exist. To make the whole thing even more confusing, there didnt seem to be any area guardians in the vicinity, either. The buildings slightly more modest than the usual city standard were guardian-less, as were all the clothes and items of the local inhabitants. As for themall, to the last one, were platinum blond.

Here we are, Ber said, ignoring the unwelcoming glances that half a dozen people were giving them. The overseer quarter. Home to all current and future overseers.

That explained why the capital had so many overseersthey were literally growing them. Realizing it, Dallion thought back to what Lady Marigold of Nerosal had told him. At the time, when she had mentioned that she had dated a platinum blond, she wasnt boasting. On the contrary, the old noble was admitting to committing taboo, one that might well have resulted in her banishment.

We dont seem to be welcome here, Dallion whispered.

Please, Ber laughed. Other than your place, Im hardly welcome anywhere. Come on, its this

Ber! An overseer emerged from the ground a few steps away. I told you not to show your face here.

Leine. Ber extended his hands in a welcoming gesture. No need to be like that. Im here on business this time.

The overseer didnt respond, but the glance he gave Dallion suggested that the baron wasnt welcome, either.

I brought something this time. Ber reached into his pocket. Just as I promised I would.

She doesnt want to see you! Black tendrils shot out of the overseers clothes, stopping inches from Bers throat. Go out of here or Ill do it for you.

Internally, Dallion groaned. Of course, it couldnt be so simple. Thats what he got for trusting a leech. There was no telling what Ber had gotten involved in, but it wasnt anything good. Now, by the looks of it, Dallion would have to fight an overseer, which would hardly go well in the eyes of anyone.

I can talk for myself, a new voice said. Emerging from one of the small roads of the overseers quarter, was a tall, slender woman in her early twenties. Like everyone else, she had platinum blond hair, and a set of black clothes overseers usually wore. The difference was that she remained very much human.

The woman made her way up to the overseer, then stopped and crossed her arms.

I dont want to see you, she said in a firm tone.

But I have it this time, Ber opened his hand.

The moment the emblem ring flickered in Bers palm, Dallion knew he had made another mistake.

Chapter 832:

When Dallion had agreed to the deal, hed never thought that the ring was aimed at impressing a potential overseer. For one thing, it was ludicrous to think that Bera drunk, leech, and flake would have anything to do with one. Furthermore, a ring wasnt something that an overseer, or even a hopeful, would be impressed with. There wasnt a person in the imperial capital who had any illusions that Ber amounted to anything.

Told you Id get it, the leech lied through his teeth. Just took a little time.

On the outside, Dallion maintained his composure. Deep down, he was cursing Ber. Of all the people he had to brag about, why did it have to be them?

The real overseer glanced at the ring in the nobles hand, then at Dallion. It was difficult to tell whether he had seen through the illusion, but it seemed more than likely.

You got this? the woman narrowed her eyes, doubt emanating from her like a coastal lighthouse.

I had help, Ber said with false modesty. I have my good friend here to thank for that.

Enduring the forced pat on the back, Dallion forced a smile.

So

What do you want in return? The woman interrupted, turning directly to Dallion.

It was possible for him to play the game and make Ber seem like the hero, or whatever he wanted to be. Yet, after everything hed gone through in the last couple of hours, Dallion decided it was better to get right to the point.

A trip outside, he said.

Everyone in the vicinity froze. Openly making such a request made two things very clear: either the person making it was stupid or confident in his worth not to get punished. It was well known that every word or action made its way to the emperor. That was the reason all the coup attempts tended to be made by archdukes, who spent most of their lives on the outside. And yet, Dallion was confident in what he was doing.

Leaving the emperors city is forbidden, the woman said. Unless you have the emperors permission.

Its not what I heard. Dallion remained calm.

Saying that will only get you in trouble.

The emperor sees everything in the city, but we arent in the city now, are we? Not to mention that he had also ignored all the void items flooding the capital. Maybe he found it amusing, maybe he didnt care, or, most likely, he was strong enough to know that no one would dare oppose him.

What did you tell him? the overseer hissed, darting to Ber and grabbing him by the neck.

Nothing! the noble replied, out of habit. Just that we used to sneak out from time to time

We used to? the woman sighed. Let him go, brother.

Reluctantly, the overseer did so. The other onlookers also returned to their chores of doing nothing.

*That was close*

, Dallion thought. He had already moved his left hand behind his back, fingers ready to cast a weapon summoning spell.

When he says we he means us, the overseer said.

I suspected.

And why would the new Elazni heir want to go outside? Thats not a thing imperials do. Even the emperor himself has only left the capital twice.

I have some unfinished business. It was time to roll the dice. Thanks to his music skill, he could tell that he wasnt exactly trusted, so it was time to take a chance. Just so you know, that isnt the real ring, he added. Its just an illusion copy.

Theres no trusting anyone these days, Ber shrugged, not particularly upset. Not even family.

I know, the woman said. Doesnt matter, though. Youd need to have the real thing to make an exact copy. It was a stupid request, anyway.

Hey. Ber took a few steps towards her. Ill get it next time, I promise. This was just a trial run.

Brother, the woman said sharply. Take him to our place. After what hes gone through, he deserves a few hours with the old gang.

You sure? The overseer frowned.

Itll be fine. I need to have a chat with this one and will be with you soon enough.

Without a nod, the overseer grabbed Ber by the shoulder, then both of them sunk into the ground. Dallions senses allowed him to follow the series of actions without issue, although he still took a step away for good measure.

Hell be fine, the woman said. Dont worry.

Somehow hes always fine. Dallion grumbled. Im Dal.

I know who you are, Baron. I think it would be better if you dont know my name.

Why?

We'll never see each other again. You probably wont come back and even if you do, you wont come here.

That was some truth to that. Dallions current focus was on leaving the cage as quickly as possible. Once he was done with everything, he might return, or maybe hed go to the Alliance instead.

Lead the way, he said.

Walking through the overseers quarter was unusual in its commonness. One would think that he was walking through the single slum of the capital, and in a way, it was just that. Everyone here was platinum blond. The vast majority were humans, just like the Luor family back in Dallions home village. Now and again he noticed an overseer among the croud, their dark presence unmistakable from the rest.

When are you set to become an overseer? he asked casually.

Maybe in a few months, the woman replied. Maybe never. It all depends if one of the others decides to retire or the emperor gets bored.

This was the first time that Dallion heard that overseers were given the option to retire.

Dont you have to pass the third awakening gate?

It helps, but no. Some werent even awakened. As I said, it all depends on the emperors fancy. Im one of those in line, but thats no guarantee.

The further they walked, the less inhabited the area became. The buildings were still there, kept in relatively good condition, only empty. There were shops, taverns, even something which looked like an old arena.

Whys this section empty? Dallion asked. Gradual decline?

You can say that. This is what the original village of Tamin was before the empire started.

The original village of Tamin, Dallion thought. It looked a lot more sophisticated than a village. At the very least, it had to have been leveled up to a town, although in that case, why were all the guardians removed?

As the domain developed, larger districts appeared. This one remained unchanged by order of the first emperor. I guess he wasnt emperor back then. She glanced sideways at Dallion. There was a time when the imperial family were the only ones who lived here, but that changed once the third emperor changed the domain to create the imperial palace. This place has been empty ever since.

Until there was a need for overseers, Dallion added.

No. We were always here. But as Star touched, we weren't viewed as equals.

The walking continued for another fifteen minutes, until, as if out of nowhere, Dallion found himself at the end of the city. It was a strange sensation. He could feel the giant bubble that was the capital's domain, but there seemed to be a void within it.

*This is the way out?*

The part where the original village touched the external wall was barely a few feet wide, but for anyone with abilities, that was enough. Technically, Dallion had already left the city. Going beyond the wall would be no different as far as the emperor was concerned.

Won't any of the overseers care? he asked.

No. This is the only privilege they have. While in the district, they can pretend to be humans. Sometimes they even leave the capital for a few hours to see what it's like. Occasionally, they help us get out as well. You'll be able to leave on your own, I take it?

Yep. Even without magic, Dallion had learned how to go through walls using the area realm.

Go for it. Just keep in mind that the opening is a lot smaller on the outside.

I get the idea. Dallion drew a spell circle in the air.

A minuscule portal appeared in the wall's blind spot.

Thanks for the help. He placed his hand in the middle of the shimmering portal. Don't be hard on Ber. I owe him one.

Sure. Just don't ever tell him that.

A split second later and Dallion was outside of the wall. Only now did it become apparent how differently he felt; as if stepping out of a sticky pool of mud. Some of the sensations of the capital were still lingering, but he could feel the freshness of the air.

All my problems are over with one single step, he thought.

It would have been nice, but with life, as one set of problems vanished, a new one came to replace them.

Immediately, Dallion cast a spell to send a message to Euryale. Instead of writing the message, Dallion used his magic threads to create a circle on the piece of paper he had summoned, along with a brief explanation.

Do you seriously think that she'll reply, dear boy? Adzorg asked in an accusatory tone.

There are a few ways I could think of.

That's not exactly the point. The mage sighed. You started a party at your place while she was having an audience with the emperor, then fled the city. I would have thought that a heads up would be the least you could



A circle of magic flashed before Dallion. A moment later, Euryale was standing there.

Knew you'd make it, Dallion smiled. How did it go?

While the gorgon had no spell craft skills, she had the second-best thing: an active spell within the piece of paper Dallion had sent.

Euryales snakes move about, getting used to the sudden change in surroundings. Clearly, magic had a different effect than entering awakened realms.

You couldn't wait to get out on your own. The gorgons snakes stirred as she spoke. Might have been for the better.

Huh?

The emperor refused. According to him, there's nothing to worry about and even if the Azures have managed to summon a few nymphs they wouldn't be a big issue. A cluster of snakes turned Dallions direction. There won't be any cooperation. You won't be joining me to the remaining Azures strongholds.

Why had the emperor refused to let him go? The man didn't seem particularly interested in Dallion after he had become a noble. One would think he wouldn't care if one of his subjects mopped up what was left of the enemy forces. Could Alien have had a role to play in this? It wouldn't be beneath him. As Archmage, the old man had the emperors ear, so he could have made the demand.

So, we both sneak out? Dallion asked.

I'm still caught up in a few things at the palace. And I don't think waiting for me would be the best idea.

Another complication, though this time it didn't sound like an insurmountable one.

After you finish, return to the capital. I'll find you.

The gorgon nodded.

Be careful. The emperor isn't the forgiving type.

Only if I don't bring him good news, Dallion said. After I'm done, I don't think leaving the capital will be a problem. If not it was fun being an imperial for a few days.

You'll never change. Euryale smiled. Where are you going?

To where it started.

The vortex fields? They're crawling with hunters and mercenaries. I doubt there'll be anything left by the time you get there.

Not the fieldthe dwarf capital. There's something I need to pick up from there. Dallion sighed internally. Something with which to settle my final debt.

Chapter 833: Monastery Husks

A smell of freshness was everywhere around. There was no refined blend of taste and aromas that filled the imperial capital. Wildness was in the air in the very real sense a wildness that Dallion had forgotten after spending even a short while away. Scarier than that, the further away he got, the

more he saw the greatest city of the empire for what it was really worth: a glamorous flycatcher that gently suffocated everyone inside into inadequacy.

Now you have a taste of what its like being imprisoned in a realm, Gleam said, flying inches away from Dallions face.

Dallion wanted to tell her that the two couldnt compare. He had voluntarily gone and stayed in the imperial capital. Thinking about it, though, that wasnt exactly true. Back on Earth, he had both witnessed and experienced the effects of peer pressure. In this world, they were a lot more real, like forces of nature. When the Moons had warned him that now hed have to fight for his opinion and acceptance in the world, Dallion had thought it would be through duels and battles. He had been so very much mistaken. The domain of the imperial capital was a combination of wills; the biggest belonged to the emperor, but a lot of the imposing nobles also left their mark.

Dont worry about it, the spectral shardfly added. It only hurts the first time.

I doubt that.

A cluster of storm clouds flickered in the distance. Despite their size, they were a natural occurrence. All the crimson fury cloud forts had remained way behind, circling the capitol's territory in a regular pattern. As many people had said, only mercenaries, scavengers, and low-level merchants roamed the war-scarred lands. The devastation was so great that even the Order of the Seven Moons didnt have anything they could obtain. That hadnt stopped them from trying, though. No less than three monasteries had popped up beyond the empires borders, within the ever-growing no-man's-land.

Theres nothing wrong with spending the night there, Gen suggested. At least getting some food.

I can catch my own food, Dallion replied.

*Youre still a Moons favorite. They wont attack you.*

That was true, although Dallion hadnt had any dreams from the Green Moon lately. Maybe passing through a monastery would do him good. It had been days since his escape from the capital, and even with a flight spell, it would be days more before he got anywhere close to his destination.

Alright, he said. Ill stop to rest at the next one.

As he said that, summoned the harpsisword from his realm. The last thing he wanted was to swap one cage for another.

The monastery was visible on the horizon, making it less than half an hour away. Not a single creature could be felt as Dallion approached. All the monsters of the wilderness had emptied from the area and people were yet to feel it. That was to be expected, more or less. Soon, though, Dallions improved senses picked up something that rang alarm bells: rotting food.

Gleam, he said, gripping his harpsisword. Any illusions in the area?

Couldnt you notice them now? she asked in her usual tone. Nothing I can sense.

I thought so, Dallion muttered. His sense of unease increased.

The monastery made entirely out of wood was the size of a small town. It had clearly been started months, if not years, ago and must have housed hundreds of souls at least. The issue was that at present, there didn't seem to be any sign of them.

No people, no animals, no plants, Dallion thought.

Seems like you'll do more than rest, dear boy, Adzorg said. Just be cautious. People tend to get creative with realm use when at war.

I know. And that's precisely what I intend to do.

## **AREA AWAKENING**

The surroundings shifted, replaced by a mountain made entirely out of wood. Forts and other large structures were scattered everywhere as far as the eye could see, but even they paled in comparison to the massive statues of the moons rising hundreds of feet high. There weren't only seven of them, though, but dozens, removing any doubt as to who the realm belonged to.

**You are in the realm of MONASTERY 1152**

**Defeat the guardian to fulfill MONASTERY 1152's destiny**

That's a lot of statues, Vihrogon appeared next to Dallion in his dryad form.

Just being devout.

Didn't seem to help them much.

There was no clear proof that the monks of the Order had been killed. With the rotting food in the monastery, though, Dallion couldn't imagine them simply leaving or being driven away. That raised an interesting question, though; all the other monasteries he had flown over had they suffered a similar fate?

As far as he was aware, there was only one power capable of doing this.

What are you thinking? Vihrogon asked.

I think a new Star has appeared on the scene. I'll need to talk to the guardian, to be sure.

That's a jump in logic.

Few would challenge the Order and out of them all, only one likes to make people disappear. Dallion summoned all three of his blades. Nox, you know what to do, he added.

## **GUARDIAN CHALLENGE!**

**Nox has challenged the guardian of MONASTERY 1152 on your behalf!**

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

If a realm can be improved, there's a guardian, Dallion said, more to himself than anyone else.

The creature before him was a lot different than what he expected. Given that everything was made of wood, he expected it to be a dryad. Instead, it turned out to be a green-flamed firebird. Green plumage shined brightly, composed of hundreds of brilliant green flames. Two beads stared at

Dallion like precious gems. The only issue was that no white rectangle had appeared above the creature. Concentrating, Dallion tried to use his magic vision to see anything more, but to no success. Clearly, the creature had some skill that allowed it to keep its stats secret, which meant only one thing.

You're a copyette, Dallion said, gripping his harpsisword tightly. The whip blade and aura sword floated less than a foot away.

The firebird didn't react, tilting its head as it towered above Dallion.

I don't have time for this, Dallion sighed. Then did a line slash.

The attack was avoidable, aimed for the creature's head. Yet, instead of simply flying away. A series of swords emerged from the air, blocking the thread of destruction.

Deep inside, Dallion smiled to himself. I knew you couldn't let the statues of the Moons be harmed, he said.

You're making things difficult for yourself, the green firebird said, blobs of anger appearing within it.

Maybe, but I'm also doing what the archbishop asked.

That seemed to calm the creature a bit. Shrinking in size, it changed from a towering monster to something that was approximately Dallion's size. Even so, it refused to switch its shape.

What happened here? Dallion lowered his harpsisword. Cultists?

No. Something else.

That statement was enough to send chills down Dallion's spine.

What else?

Whatever it was, it was fast. Swept through five monasteries like they were nothing. I didn't notice until it was too late. None of us did.

So, you can talk to each other. That was a new twist of sorts, though hardly surprising. With everything else the Order was capable of, it could well have found a way to give an echo item to a guardian or provide another method of instant communication.

For them to hear nothing, blocker items had to be involved. That didn't exclude the Star, but in general, the cultists didn't care about stealth. It was always possible that the new Star if there was one had a new view on things, although Dallion still had his doubts. The whole thing didn't seem right.

How many people were there here?

Sixty-four awakened just here, the copyette replied. A bit less in the other temples.

I'll look into this, Dallion said. Are you able to give a message to the archbishop?

Yes.

Good. Tell him that I haven't forgotten. He'll know what I mean.

Without further explanation, Dallion left the realm. Although he doubted he'd find any clues, he still went through the empty monastery, going through all the rooms and buildings one by one. There was no trace of the people whatsoever. As far as he could see, there weren't any signs of violence, either. It was as if the monks and clerics had simply poofed out of existence almost as if someone had banished them.

Shield, is the void capable of banishing people? Dallion asked.

That would be a nice trick. The dryad guardian laughed. Technically, yes. It requires a lot of preparation, though. It's far easier to swallow settlements in the wilderness. Just the people not so much. Vanishing a cleric, irony aside, would be almost impossible.

The Moons are stronger than the void, Dallion repeated. At least for the moment.

Putting all weapons except his harpsisword back into his realm, Dallion cast another flight spell and continued towards the scene of his battle against Vihrogon.

You've been quiet, Harp, he said in the items realm. Is there a reason?

Hopefully not, the nymph replied.

*So, you suspect something.*

*It's not something I want to discuss. Hopefully, it's not something you'll have to worry about.*

*And if it is?*

The harpsisword's silence didn't fill Dallion with confidence. As long as he'd known her, she'd kept more secrets than most, and yet she always had an air of calmness surrounding her. Lately, she had become uncharacteristically nervous. One would almost say that she was afraid.

What level must I reach to be safe? Dallion asked.

I told you not to worry about that, Harp replied. Focus on your current issues first.

Will a hundred be enough?

No answer.

A hundred and ten?

No answer.

A hundred and twenty?

They won't let you reach a hundred and twenty, the nymph said reluctantly. And even if they do, it won't be enough.

Over a hundred and twenty. The number was impressive in itself. It was about fifty percent more than Dallion's current level. Going that high was going to be outright impossible within the imperial

capital and extremely difficult outside of it. Yet, that wasn't what worried him the most. Coincidence or not, the number was precisely the one he'd seen the emperor have.

A thought popped into the back of Dallion's mind, one almost verging on blasphemy. He tried to ignore it or reason it away with logic, but it kept persisting. Dallion was certain beyond any doubt that the emperor couldn't be the star. Void and magic didn't mix; one would always give way to the other. Every rule had its exception, though. Arthur's had desperately tried to gain a spellcraft skill gem. What if the emperor had managed the reverse, making him able to control void matter?

No, Dallion told himself.

If that had been the case, the Order would have told him directly. It had to be someone other than the emperor, though maybe still from the capital.

The closer Dallion got to the crater that had been the dwarf kingdom's capital, the more signs of life he found. Plants and animals kept on being as nonexistent as before, but the number of people had increased—hunters, mercenaries, and looter scum, seeking to find anything that might earn them some gold.

I used to be like that, Dallion said, hovering in the sky.

Most people outside of the cities are, Vihrogon said. On the bright side, you had the decency to wait a few thousand years before your looting. What are you here to get exactly?

Clay pots, Dallion replied.

*That's a new one. Why?*

I need them for something. He peered at the large hole that seemed to continue to the center of the world. Without the glow of the aether vortex, there was nothing magical or majestic about it—just one huge tunnel to the abyss. I also need to find a gear piece.

#### Chapter 834: Item Reviving

Searching through the destroyed city was more cumbersome than one might think. The few sections that had survived the vortex had been emptied by fleeing survivors and then picked clean by scavengers who'd come for a quick profit. The more dedicated ones prospected the walls of the newly created chasm, searching for fragments of valuable materials propelled there by the force of magic. Dallion himself had joined them, though he had something very specific in mind.

Hey, partner. A fury floated down from above, stopping in the air ten feet from Dallion.

At one point, he had been a looter, or at least he so claimed. Even before the battle at the vortex fields, the fury had decided that it would be a lot safer and more profitable to avoid combat and just go through the devastation that it left behind. There were always valuables to be found, and occasionally, one would come across something that nobles would give anything to obtain.

I think I found another one for you, he tossed a small chunk of sun gold to Dallion.

Using a spell, the otherworlder grabbed hold of the item mid flight and carefully examined it. It was definitely part of something larger, but not the thing that Dallion was looking for.

Nope. Another spell floated it back to the fury. Not one of mine. Thanks, though.

No problem, the other laughed.

On the surface, the fury hunter appeared to be in his late teens. In truth, he was three times Dallions age, though only half his level. The ever-white clothes contrasted with the dirt and darkness of the general area and the people rummaging through it. Allegedly, his name was Frost, but that was highly doubtful. When it came to hunters, many kept their past hidden. The same could be said about Dallion. No one suspected he was a noble. His ability to fly had made it impossible for him to deny he was a mage, but the story he gave to the few who had inquired was that he had been rogued long before the war started and now was here looking for means to increase his magic trait on the down low.

I found you some pots as well, Frost floated closer. A rough sack full of small clay pots, each the size of a childs fist, moved along with him. Theyre whole, but might have a few chips here and there.

Its fine. Dallion grabbed the sack and put it on the ledge beside him.

Why do you even want these things? There are much better souvenirs.

They have their uses.

Whatever you say. Got anything for me?

A few scraps. Dallion glanced at the small ledge that had been chiseled into the wall. Not the most orthodox use of his carving skill, but quite useful at present. Sky silver mostly.

Every little bit helps.

Ignoring him, Dallion concentrated on the wall in front of him again. Combining magic with his forging skills, he could see a large fragment of the gearwheel or something that looked very much like it a few feet into the wall. Originally, it had been part of Adzorgs device, now the only item in the world that could free him from the generals clutches.

A few of the old timers left this morning, Forst kept on going. The Alliance has been crushing the Azures, leaving lots of empty settlements behind. Easy pickings, some might say.

Why dont you join them, then?

We both know that theres no such thing as easy pickings, especially near a border. Besides, being a fury might be hazardous for ones health so far in. Same could be said for a mage.

I told you, Dallion sighed. I have nothing to do with the war.

Me neither. But who do you think will believe us?

Seeing that the fury wasnt leaving, Dallion decided to take a break. Turning around, he sat down on the ledge he had carved, then reached for his flask. Frost did the same, using an air current to fetch his from the bottom of the chasm.

What will you do when you find what youve been looking for? he asked.

Leave. Dallion took a gulp. Ive business in Nerosal.

Nerosal? Wasnt the province engulfed in civil war?

Not for a while. The old archduke got it back. Although the Order were the ones really in control. Doesn't matter, though. I'll just be there to see a few friends before I continue south.

There's nothing south.

Good. So, there's a chance for a little calm.

The fury shook his head. Well, good luck. I'll stay a bit longer. There's still plenty to be found here. Maybe by the time I'm done, the war will be over and I'll have enough to live in luxury till the end of my days.

A hunter's dream. Pity that so few of them reach it.

The conversation devolved into pointless small talk, after which the fury flew back down in search of more precious metals. Naturally, the small pile that Dallion had found flew off with him. This provided enough quiet for Dallion to focus on his own task.

Lines of magic threads were drawn in the air, slowly building up a nine-circle spell. Any onlooker without magic would remain confused. There didn't seem to be any apparent effect. The spell flashed, then disappeared, leaving everything unchanged. The difference was that now Dallion could reach into the rock itself, as if it were made of water, and pull out the gearwheel fragment. Just to be on the same side, he used a spell to do that as well.

That much will do, dear boy, Adzorg said. There's no point in going for the teeth fragments.

The fragment emerged from the stone surface. Neither the battle nor the aether vortex had managed to destroy it completely. It was worthless, of course. Without the archmage or the rest of the device, there was nothing it could be used for. Still, a vow was a vow.

Time to put it back together, Dallion said.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality shifted. Night had just started in his realm, mixing the faint glow of the stars and Moons with the strong neon light of the Moonstones. Making his way to the crystals, Dallion looked at the night sky. Most of the stars were green, with a few yellow ones scattered here and there. For all intents and purposes, one might say that he had learned, if not all, then a great majority of skills. Only the more exotic ones remained skills that would take anyone a lifetime to learn while exploring the world.

I can just make an illusion, you know, Gleam landed onto Dallion's shoulder, soon to be followed by Ruby.

That won't work on Moon vows, he replied.

The condition of the wheel wasn't specified, either, the shardfly said. Put the pieces in a bag, hand it over and you're done.

From a technical point of view, she was probably right. Dallion didn't want to take the chance, though. The general was as slippery as they came. He had already used quality issues as an excuse



to increase Dallions debt back when he had loaned him the armadil shield. If Dallion were to give him a broken part, there was every chance he might do the same.

Im strong enough not to use tricks, Dallion replied.

The rest of the item fragments were on the ground a few steps from the Moonstone crystals. There were twenty-seven in total, all of various forms or sizes. Ideally, Dallion would need a few more to render the item flawless, but as Adzorg had said, even the current amount was enough should he resort to magic.

Hey, boss! Lux popped up right in front of Dallions face. Can I help?

No, Lux, not this time. Dallion petted the creature on the head. Its all forging and magic.

Magic? The aetherfish familiar emerged as well.

My magic, Gem.

Dallion placed the piece he had just found on the ground, among the rest. Moving them about, he quickly recreated the general pattern of the item. It was large, containing an impressive amount of awakened metals. There was a time when he wouldnt have dreamed of fixing something so broken, especially made out of these materials. Now, it was simply a matter of creativity and ingenuity.

Silver and purple markers appeared around the shattered item. Dallion ignored the silver ones, focusing on the ones that showed him how to thread enough magic threads to connect the pieces together. One by one, he merged the threads together like a surgeon attaching a severed limb. Each time two threads were merged, a crack separating the items vanished.

After several hours, the item was whole again rather it was mostly whole. While the parts had assembled as if they were never broken, there were plenty of cracks and dents. One final thing remained before the item could be whole again: entering its realm and going through the mending labyrinth.

That brings back memories, Dallion thought as he linked the item to his own realm. A golden door formed in the ground, connecting the two realms. Without a moments hesitation, Dallion jumped in.

### **Overall completion 37%**

A blue rectangle emerged as Dallion walked through the labyrinth.

Thirty-seven? he asked. So much for doing a good job.

*If magic could fix the world, dear boy, the emperor would have ordered us to do it.*

True. The magic was the epitome of shortcuts and exceptions, but it was no substitute for the real thing. Summoning his harpsisword, Dallion continued along the labyrinth.

The fashion in which special metal items were repaired didnt differ from the average ones. Dallion still had to find all the missing pieces and place them in the respective holes. Now and again hed have to face a crackling or ten, but those were so weak that he felt ashamed for using a blade to begin with.

All the time Lux kept insisting on helping, and ultimately, Dallion agreed. The firebirds healing magic had grown considerably, but even it wasnt strong enough to deal with materials of this nature.

That didnt stop him from trying. Meanwhile, Dallion diplomatically ignored the lack of progress while continuing with the repairs himself.

After three days and a half, the sought after rectangle finally appeared.

**Realm fully mended!**

**The GEARWHEEL is now flawless.**

**ITEM REVIVER**

**(+2 PERCEPTION, +2 BODY)**

**Youve brought a dead item back to life. Keep in mind the item had no guardian. Things would be a lot more complicated if it did.**

An achievement? Dallion wondered.

Not bad, though he didnt expect it. Still, there was no point in looking a gift horse in the mouth. A few points here and there were always welcome.

Going through the maze one final time to admire his work, Dallion then stepped back into his realm and severed the link.

Youre getting overconfident, Harp said, standing near the Moonstones in her nymph form. You shouldnt be.

Her comment had an instant sobering effect. While he remained great at mending, a tinkering noble wasnt something that would instill fear in the hearts of others or help him face Grym.

I was just caught up in the moment, Dallion lied. Im done, though. With this, my last shackle will be gone.

The last shackle, you know. Theres a lot more training you need to go through. You have all the skills, but none of them are at a hundred. You have two rare traits, but youre still neglecting your empathy.

Dallion looked at her. Grains of concern were visible everywhere throughout her body. It was obvious she was worried about somethingsomething that would require more strength than he possessed now. Was she scared he might fall to Grym? The new Star? Or the void itself?

Ill practice what I can on the way, he said. And I wont get cocky.

Youll try, she replied, then disappeared, reverting to her harpsisword form.

Dallion remained silent for a few seconds more, then left his awakening realm, taking the gearwheel with him.

The first thing he did upon returning to the real world was to cast an illusion spell over it, giving the item the appearance of a crude lump of silver. Carrying the item in all its glory was enough to tempt anyone, even low-level hunters.

Grabbing the sack of clay pots, Dallion cast a flight spell, ascending into the air. It was time to visit the person he despised most in this world.

Chapter 835: An Unruled City

Threads of void emerged from the Elazni ring only to disappear moments later, leaving Dallion with the impression that the item was mocking him. It seemed that each time he'd look at it, it would reveal its nature just enough for him to notice, though nothing more. It was impossible to determine the direction the threads were pointing, only that the void was out there.

Void connects to void, Vihrogon said. Could be any number of corrupted guardians along the way that have attracted it.

That wasn't particularly useful. While not purified, it wouldn't be possible to get any information from the ring guardian; not because he was particularly strong or clever, but because it turned out to be feral, aggressive, and not at all focused with anything outside its realm.

Taking another look at the item, Dallion put it away. There would be time for that later. He had a good idea where the void was. Only there could it corrupt the first Star and slowly seep into the world. It was no accident that void matter remained in many of the ruins all those millennia ago. The only question Dallion had was whether the void would be stronger than the entities it corrupted or not. Fighting Arthurows had proven to be difficult, effectively leading to Dallion's death; not to mention that the Star had been gravely wounded at the time.

Dark clouds gathered on the horizon. There didn't seem to be any furies controlling them. The war had driven all the capable ones to the front. Interestingly enough, Dallion didn't remember seeing any in the imperial castle. In fact, he couldn't remember seeing any non-humans other than Euryale. Overseers and magical constructs protected the city, serving those within it.

Dallion! A chorus of grass filled his head. You're back!

That was another thing that he hadn't experienced in a while: the reaction of wilderness plants. Normally, one wouldn't notice a blade of grass in the plains, but the blades of grass definitely noticed him.

You've been gone for a very long time! Several of them added, their voices mingling.

I was a bit busy, he replied. Plants didn't need to know, nor would they care, about his recent promotions. Has anything interesting been going on here?

A lot of people used to pass through here not too long ago, a plant replied. Some fought, some died. They were tasty.

Only a plant could find a way to describe a battle in such a way as to make the listener even more repulsed by it. Of course, to a hunter, nothing was strange or even grotesque.

*Then they stopped.*

So, no one's been passing through after that?

*Some wheels. Then they stopped.*

The departure of Countess Priscord and the following uncertainty had clearly reduced Nerosal to a backwater city again. Its level was still that of the second provincial capital, but there was no telling how long that would last.

Thanks. Talk to you again soon.

Blades of grass kept on talking to him for the next half hour, but he paid them little notice. By now, the guard towers of Nerosal were visible in the distance. In the recent past, they were full of soldiers, making sure that no invaders made their way so far in the province. Now they were empty husks of buildings that stood there like hollow trees. All imperial legions had long been sent to the borders of the empire or up north to help with the war. What was left of the local awakened troops had returned to their city forts and barracks, not even bothering with wilderness hunts.

Dallion could already see the area becoming dangerous for travel in the next few years. One could only imagine the number of wild chainlings that had emerged and were quietly growing to the point that nobles would be forced to lead parties of volunteers on hunts again.

Gleam, Dallion said. Check if theres anything fishy.

Theres nothing, the shardfly grumbled. Theres nothing suspicious for miles. There isnt anything for miles! Not even one pesky little creature to fight with.

Ever since her return from the banished lands, the spectral shardfly was constantly itching to fight as much as possible.

Fine. She fluttered further up into the air. Maybe Ill get lucky.

Time had swept by rapidly in the area, removing even the traces of battle. Despite that, the scars were there, hidden beneath the surface, all too visible to Dallion. Every plant and guardian to the city itself had the same tale: people, clashes, destruction, then a long pause and silence. Merchants had become few and far between, and even mercenaries had rarely frequented the area. Just as in the past, everyone kept to their own settlements, seeking shelter from the greater world outside.

By evening, the outer walls of the city had become visible. When the countess had taken over, she had erected them to ensure that the citys food production was secure and tightly controlled. Now, they were in a state of ruin. The gates were missing, as were the guards that usually protected them. The way things were going, in a couple of decades, they might vanish altogether, becoming part of the landscape.

Its too fast, Vihrogon said. Its not natural.

I know, Dallion agreed. I cant see any void in them.

*Void doesnt have to corrupt something to have it decay.*

Adzorg, could your device have caused this?

*Thats possible, dear boy. But, in that case, there would have been tower vortexes all over the place. Keep in mind that vortexes are the sign that things are going really bad. This, as unfortunate as it seems, is part of a citys natural cycle.*

Cities rise and fall, Dallion whispered.

Since they had high levels and powerful guardians, people were tempted to think that cities would keep on growing forever. But, as the Moons had told Dallion, a settlement was nothing without its people. The more people left, the weaker the guardians became, making them vulnerable to

cracklings and other Star spawn. Ultimately, a city without people ceased to be a city and was swallowed by the wilderness.

A small contingent of guards was at the gate. Dallion could feel no positive emotions emanating from them. They had clearly gone through a lot and were now starting to resent it.

Stop! one of them shouted the moment Dallion got twenty feet away. Whats your business?

Im here to see the overseer, Dallion got directly to the point.

The overseer doesnt see anyone, the guard smirked, although a strong sensation of fear echoed within him.

Shell make an exception for me. Dallion had many approaches to take. The logical thing to do was keep a low profile and use his music skills to trick the guards into letting him through. That would be pointless, though. If the emperor seriously wanted to find him, he would be found.

With a swift action, he cast a simple one circle spell, covering himself with a cyan glow. The spell itself was useless, but it had the desired effectprove beyond doubt that Dallion was not to be trifled with.

M-my apologies, mage, the guard stuttered. Please, enter. Ill send for the overseer right aw

Theres no need for that. The familiar form of Nerosals overseer emerged just outside the city gate. Dal and I are old friends.

The remaining guards rushed to open the door at double time, as Dallion calmly continued walking forward. Taking on the act of a typical mage, Dallion ignored their efforts, not pausing his pace one bit. Soon enough, he was well within the city, followed by the overseer.

You gave them quite the scare, she said. Theyll have nightmares for weeks.

At least itll let them appreciate the days more. What happened? Things werent so bad the last time I was here.

Nothing happened. The count is in the palace, the members of the Order are in their temples, leaving everything to the rest of us. Youd think that people would be happy with so much freedom.

Only if it were real.

I see youre now fully familiar with how the world works, Baron. The intonation suggested that the overseer had smiled beneath her black veil. Congratulations.

Thanks. Dallion tried not to sound bitter, but he failed. The wars reach had made it all the way here.

I assume youve come here for a reason?

Just a point along the path, Dallion replied. There are a few things Id like to ask you, though.

Go ahead. At your level, I doubt theres anything I could tell you about the world.

My grandmother. What do you know about her?

It was rare for an overseer to be surprised. Entities like them tended to have seen it all. Yet, it was the memories of the time before losing their humanity that caused them the greatest pain and discomfort.

Still as reckless as ever, she said at last. No, you're even more reckless now. An awakened, even a hunter, had limits they couldn't breach. As a noble, you're past those.

Tell me, Dallion said firmly.

Strands of darkness emerged from the ground, surrounding them like a bubble. They were so thin that most people wouldn't even notice, isolating the two from the rest of the domain as they walked.

You have a habit of asking dangerous things, the overseer said. People have been banished for less.

That's for me to worry about. He still worked for the people who did the banishing.

I suppose I don't have the power to refuse.

I'd really prefer it didn't come to that. Ideally, I would have preferred if you or grandpa had told me directly all those years ago. I suspect you had your reasons, but you could have given me a few hints.

Moon vows hold a lot of power, the woman turned to him. Shame and regret hold even more. Very well, I'll tell you what I know, but you won't like it.

Trust me, I've been on a roll learning things I don't like.

Not in that sense. The truth is, I don't know much. I never got to meet her. In fact, I never even saw her. When Kraisten and my brother set off for the imperial capital, I was already an overseer. I didn't even get to see Lanitol. I did manage to hear a thing or two, though.

Dallion slowed down his pace, listening intently.

There was talk that Kraisten had remained in the capital longer than he was supposed to. Many of the local nobles were disgusted by it. That's not from whom I learned the details, though.

Why then?

My brother.

It was Dallion's turn to be surprised. Given the old man's hatred of cities, he expected him to go directly to Dherma village.

He'd lost his trust in your grandfather, so he needed someone close to talk to. I was the only one available.

There was a reason for your cruelty, Dallion thought. Aspion had made sure to take control of the village to prevent anyone from sharing his fate. Sadly, in the process, he had become a copy of the things he despised in the world.

He never told me her name, nor the family she belonged to, the overseer continued. Just that she was important, too important for Kraisten to be permitted to be with her. You know him, he didn't care.

I've been hearing that a lot.

Then he trusted someone he shouldn't have.

That was new. Duchess Elazni had mentioned no such thing.

Why?

An otherworlder he met here.

A human?

Definitely so. He was very plain looking. I didn't think anything of the man. He and Kraisten would talk about things that made no sense to me. They'd laugh and joke as if they were long-lost friends. It was this man that made your grandfather go to the capital.

That made little sense. From what Dallion knew, otherworlders weren't viewed in high regard by then. Now, they were all but gone. Everyone claimed that most of them went to the imperial capital. Having been there, Dallion knew that wasn't the case. As far as he could remember, he hadn't seen a single one, just heard stories.

Do you remember his name?

I must have at some point, but not anymore. Even back then, I got the impression that the lord mayor didn't like him much. He left the city as quickly as he could, then gained favor by betraying Kraisten. I wouldn't be surprised if he married into the same family as a reward. That's usually how it works.

So, the wall wasn't due to something Dallion's grandfather had done, at least not entirely. Someone else had betrayed him, someone who possibly even now was part of House Elazni. Or maybe it was the opposite? The other branch family had a lot more to gain if an otherworlder didn't join their rivals.

Thanks, Kiera, Dallion said. That helped a lot. Now, I'd like to rest a bit at the Gremlins Timepiece.

#### Chapter 836: The New Icepickers

The streets were as full as before, but the cheer wasn't there. It wasn't just a case of the world being at war. With no one firmly in control of the domain, there were no limiting echoes to boost people's mood, nor did the domain itself fill the city with joy. The overseer could probably do that, but she was as much a tool as a person the owner of the domain had to make the decision, which apparently hadn't occurred.

Some stalls and shops were better than others. The Mirror Pool seemed to be doing well. Thanks to his magic skills, Dallion was instantly able to recognize anyone with disfocus items as they tried to blend into the crowd.

This place has seen better days, Vihrogon said. Don't worry, though. It will again, once a proper ruler is determined.

Dallion nodded. Good or bad, as long as the ruler was confident enough, all efforts would focus on getting the inhabitants to believe that they were the most fortunate people in the world. Just as life had been like in Dherma village during the rule of Aspion Luor, ignorance was bliss.

The Gremlins Timepiece was noticeably less lively than usual. There were no tables on the street and from what could be seen through the windows, there hardly was anyone inside.

Here goes. Dallion stepped through the door.

To his great surprise, the place was not only rather full, but he knew a large part of the people thereall of them, with the exception of Hannahwere former Icepicker members. It was as if half the guild had relocated here.

Dal! Estezol shouted, causing all eyes to turn in the appropriate direction.

All chatter suddenly stopped. Any other time Dallion would have been concerned with what would follow, but knowing their emotions was a pretty clear giveaway that none of them were mad at him. Even after all this time, they still considered him one of them and were glad he was alright.

Its been a while! the short, bearded man continued. Being a mage must have kept you pretty busy.

Only an optimist like him would greet him in such a fashion. One would almost think that the last few years hadnt occurred, and the guild was about to take part in another Nerosal Festival any month now.

Everyone has their way of coping, dear boy, Adzorg reminded. One of the best ways Ive observed is to skip long stretches of time, pretending they never happened.

The rest of the people soon followed. A pair of siblings that Dallion had started his item leveling career were quick to rush to him, almost drowning him with questions. Grunt, the quiet giant, was also there, as were Bel, Spike, June, and several more people Dallion knew rather well. Not least, March was also present. Seeing her, though, filled Dallion with mixed reactions; he couldnt be sure whether that was really her or a copyette.

A burst of combat splitting suddenly occurred, putting Dallion on guard. Unable to see the immediate consequences, he split as well, concentrating on all points of entry into the hall. One of his instances rushed to the staircase, only to see someone elses instance already there.

Vend? Dallion asked.

Good to see you still have it, the other replied. I feared magic might have made you rusty.

All of Vends instances faded away, leaving only the one Dallion was talking to. Naturally, Dallion did the same.

A new silence filled the room. In the main hall, the table March was sitting at quickly cleared.

You look well, Vend said. More or less.

In contrast, the old guild mate hadnt managed to go through the last few years unscathed. His entire right arm was missing, leaving an empty sleeve hanging from his shoulder. Looking closer, Dallion found that it wasnt a simple wound, but a permanent condition. No healing spell would be able to restore him, even if Dallion had the affinity to cast one powerful enough.

Lets have a drink. Vend made his way to Marchs table. After a few seconds, Dallion followed.

A jug of ale and several glasses had already found their way there. The taste was passable, but not something Dallion was keen on. Gaining a few dozen points of perception had changed his tastes quite a lot. Thanks to his time as a hunter he was able to endure it.

Wheres Hannah? he changed the subject. Its not like her to be gone.



Out haggling for supplies, March said. The guild master she paused. The former guild master restored the Icepickers making her inn our guildhall, but she still insists on doing the work herself. I guess thats her way of dealing with things.

Of course she would. Dallion thought. Of all the people she found dear, only one remained at the inn. Eury had left long ago, Jiroh had returned to her world, and Dallion had become a mage who had captured Adzorg. That only left Pan hiding in the kitchen.

Is that why you came here? Vend took a mug with his left hand.

No, Dallion admitted. I came to settle some old debts. After that, Ill be heading south.

Back to your home? March asked.

Further south. After what hed learned about his grandfather, passing through his village had become even less appealing than before. I just thought Id pass by and see how she was doing. Didnt expect to see the guild back.

You always had your eyes on bigger things. I suppose its normal for an otherworlder.

The guild helped me a lot. I enjoyed my time there, but

Youve all grown up now. There comes a time when you must stop playing with children and move on to the real game. She looked him straight in the eye.

No words were said, but Dallion knew she was aware of his change. Of everyone here, she was probably the only one who knew with certainty that he had become a noblethe thing she used to be.

I see that a lot of the city guards are gone, he changed the subject again. Any reason for that?

Whod be stupid enough to attack a city under the protection of the Order? Even the Pool is on guard. Every week, a few of the leaders go to the temples to donate and make sure things remain acceptable.

And the arena?

Just for show. The festival was Priscords thing. After what she did, people want to forget. Maybe the guild master will start a new event at some point. Hes on thin ice as well. As a remnant of the previous war, hed lose his life if he attracts too much attention.

A slow decline until Archduke Lanitol passes on, Dallion sighed, then took another sip of his ale.

The province had survived the worse, but had definitely seen better days. If Dallion were in charge, he knew he could turn things around. Could he achieve that, though? Archduke Darude had a nice ring to it. Hed have to forsake his family nameno one would permit the existence of an Elazni archduke, least of all his own family. Still

A presence suddenly emerged a foot away from Dallion. It wasnt a spell, nor was it the appearance of an overseer, meaning that there could be one single answer.

Dallions fingers moved quickly, casting a summon spell. In less than a blink of the eye, the Nox dagger was in his hand, ripping the air to the new presence. However, it never managed to reach its target. The attack was blocked. It wasnt a complicated block, just a persons hand grabbing hold of Dallions forearm. Breaking out of it would have been easy, if thats what Dallion intended to do.

You ungrateful pisser! Hannah shouted. After all, Ive done, you still attack me in such a sloppy way. I had hoped the world would have taught you better. She let go of his arm, then slammed a large plate on the table. Some battlemage you turned out to be.

Laughter filled the room, but unnatural laughter. Looking closely, Dallion could see the fine threads of magic in the air connecting to most of the people present. All of them were coming from the kitchen.

Put that away, the innkeeper hissed.

Dallion obeyed, causing the dagger to disappear.

In the background Grunt approached, bringing a chair for Hannah to sit.

What am I going to do with you? the innkeeper asked, leaning back in her chair. I told you youre the eye of a hurricane and you come here first chance you get.

Di is fine, Dallion said. After all this time, his fear of the woman had completely faded, yet the respect had grown.

And the captain?

Adzorg is fine. There was only one person Hannah referred to as the captain. He achieved what he was aiming for.

So, its over.

Dallion could see the internal sigh of relief pass through the woman. The emotion was so strong that it nearly knocked him down. It was as if she had been carrying the weird of the world for years, before finally casting it off moments ago.

She knows, Dallion thought. All this time, she pretended to be nothing but an innkeeper, yet she knew.

Of course, she knew, dear boy. Adzorg joined in. She knew about the device from the very beginning.

Before Dallion could say anything, a series of air currents sliced through the door, removing it from its hinges.

Youre quite popular today, Vihrogon said.

Popular in all the wrong ways Dallion thought.

This time, the atmosphere in the inn changed completely. The guild members had drawn their weapons and were looking into the street where the entrance door had been. A large fury, clad in light armor, stepped in, followed shortly by a second.

How many of them are there? Dallion asked all items and area guardians in a hundred-foot radius.

Hundreds of voices replied, all saying the same thing: there was absolutely no one outside.

The general would like a word with you, the large fury said, ignoring the hostility of the room.

Sure. Dallion feared that might happen. Tell him that

The general wants a word with you now, the fury interrupted. A Moon vow was made, so hes within his right to drag you out, if thats what you prefer. Glancing at the Icewakers present, a smirk appeared on the mercenaries face. Hes not the only one whos made a deal with the general. If you want your debts postponed, you better not interfere.

So thats how it was. Due to the many conflicts and misery that Nerosal had been subjected to, the slimy snobs influence had grown tremendously. Hardly surprising given that the artifact bubble had popped long before the poison plague and subsequent provincial war. Still, Dallion hadnt imagined it would get to the point that hed become this brazen.

Can I finish my drink? Dallion used his music skills to add some weight to his words.

The fury glared at him, but said nothing.

I dont have debts, Vend stood up. Ill join him.

Vend, March grabbed him by the shoulder. Youre in no state for that. She pulled him down, standing up instead. But I am.

Im touched, but theres no need, Dallion said. Thisll be settled quickly.

Nothing with the general is settled quickly. The woman put on her helmet. If it is, Ill just enjoy the walk.

Dallion finished his mug in one go. It wasnt the most pleasant experience. Drinking the liquid felt like drinking sandpaper with a hint of oranges. Once he was done with his debt, hed ask Pan to make him something better.

Is he in the usual place? Dallion asked as he placed the empty mug on the table in front of him.

Ill escort you. There was fear in the furys voice, but even so it was less than the fear that emanated from him.

I also dont have any debts, Hannah stood up.

Captain. March turned to the innkeeper. I can handle this. You dont have to.

She was the captain of the guard, wasnt she, Adzorg? It suddenly hit him. The first time your device exploded.

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

**Imperial Academy, 35 years ago.**

Chapter 837: Hannah's Story

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

**Imperial Academy, 35 years ago.**

No one knew exactly when the Imperial Academy was created. Depending on who was asked it ranged from the fourth Tamin emperor to fifty years before the empire itself. The only thing on

which everyone agreed on was that it was the only place within the capital that valued skill, loyalty, and lineage in equal measure.

Are you sure about this, your grace? an overseer asked. He was middle-aged in appearance, wearing a single bronze ring on top of his black gloves. That ring was the only thing that differentiated him from the other overseers an indication that he belonged to a specific family.

Here we go again, Countess Abella Usec thought.

The prodigy of her family, she was one of the main reasons for its rise in political power. A chance of birth, however, prevented her from becoming the next head. Technically, there was no reason for it. The empire had ended the practice three generations ago, but some of the older families desperately clung to it like a shield.

Your brother was most insistent that you consider it further, the overseer added.

I've decided, Abella said firmly.

You can still become a noble, your grace.

The woman turned around and looked at him. For the first time in days, a smile appeared on her face.

I already am a noble, she replied. I've been one for a while.

Left with no other option, the overseer bowed, then disappeared into the ground. Whatever ties Abella had with her family, they were now gone. No, rather they were put on hold. Imperial officers were still held in high regard; those who had become such voluntarily different from most. The countess was familiar with the game of nobles well enough to know this was a way for the imperial family to keep control of the nobles. Those who lost favor would send members of their family to join the imperial legions to make up for it; those who had earned too much favor would negotiate for their members to become instructors. Abella was different. Her decision was a combination of several things, not the least of which to anger her family.

Two metalins the size of buildings stood at the entrance of the academy. They were bigger than anything Abella had seen on the streets of the imperial palace. Surprisingly, the number of people in front of the gates was a lot less than she imagined. The imperial legion was composed of tens of thousands awakened all over the empire. The Academy, in contrast, was almost exclusively reserved for nobles from the capital itself. Then again, they were nobles in name only.

Blessings and glory, a woman in her late thirties said as Abella passed through the gate. According to her insignia, she was a sergeant in the imperial legion. Judging by the flawless state of her uniform, she had to be level fifty at least, possibly with some actual combat experience.

A large path made of crystal tiles continued to the main entrance of the main building. All candidates passed through there. It was said that at one time there had been three entrances, each only accepting candidates of particular levels. The low-level awakened would pass through the first, becoming common legionaries, the mid-levels would pass through the middle one becoming sergeants, and everyone above would pass through the third, becoming officers.

No such thing happened this time. The vast hall had only one entrance, and one corridor leading further on. Everything else was composed of space, statues and large marble desks, with people behind them. Each desk had a line of candidates in front of it a novel concept. In the capital, waiting

was a political statement those with more power used it on those with less. Here, it appeared to be part of life.

After some hesitation, Abella went to the one with the least amount of people. The two candidates in front were quiet, not at all happy to be here. The family crests and emblems had been removed from their uniform and in an attempt to reduce their shame, but only made things worse.

Next, a bored woman in a cyan mage uniform said. By the looks of it, she didn't enjoy being here either.

Curious about the procedure, Abella focused on everything that took place in front of her.

Legionary, the mage said, sliding an aether crystal along the marble desk. Continue along the corridor.

Terrified of the experience, the candidate didn't ask any questions, just took the crystal and continued along.

That was it? Abella wondered. She imagined there being more to it. At the very least, she expected it to be like an awakening trial. There were no indications that the test had taken a realm none of them had come in contact with a common item until well after the crystal had been given, and no spells seemed to have been used, at least as far as Abella could see.

Next, the mage said again, looking at Abella.

Right. The girl stepped forward.

Remove your blocker items, the mage said.

I don't have blocking items, Abella said defiantly. Unlike most people in her family, she didn't believe in such things. Like most high-level awakened, she liked to flaunt her level as much as possible for the sole reason that there wasn't anything others could do. Information was power, but only up to a point.

I don't have time for this. The mage yawned.

I don't. Abella crossed her arms in defiance.

The mage kept on looking at her expectantly for a few more seconds, then cast a spell. Her fingers moved through the air, then abruptly stopped.

Abella prepared herself mentally, ready for whatever the effects of the spell might be. Yet, the expression of shock that appeared moments later was on the mage's face.

Wait here. The mage stood up.

Why? What happened?

The mage vanished without an answer. Seconds later, a pair of guards walked up to Abella, stopping a few feet away. Neither of them said a word, but she could tell by their body poses that they were ready to react. Unlike most of the people she'd seen, these were of a high level, possibly sixty or

more. There was a good chance that she could take them nonetheless, but the victory would be short-lived. In a room full of mages, an awakened was just another commoner.

Several minutes passed. The other queues kept on going, evaluating candidates one after the other as if nothing had happened.

Why are you keeping me here? Abella asked over her shoulder. Do you think I cheated?

That was the usual accusation she got. Being a prodigy at sixteen wasn't too unusual for the capital. Being a prodigy able to outshine everyone else that caused suspicion. Her parents had been convinced that she had made use of a spell or artifact. On two occasions, they had brought mages from the Academy to examine her, trying to find the way in which she had boosted her power. Both times there was nothing to find, making everyone even more convinced that there was something fishy about it.

The green-robed mage appeared from the corridor, walking with a wide step. He was followed by the woman who had started all this.

Is that the one? the man asked, looking at Abella as if she were common-born.

Yes, battle mage, the woman said behind him.

With a flick of his hand, the battle mage caused the desk to split in two, each part moving to the side, so he could get to Abella. The action was impressive enough to cause her to tense up.

Alright, the man said. Let's see what we have here.

Without warning, he placed his thumb on her forehead. There was no instance of pain, no warmth, no chill, just a very dry finger pressing into her skin.

Why are you here? the battle mage asked.

To join the imperial legion, Abella said without hesitation.

Did anyone make you do it? Is your family in trouble?

My family has its troubles, but status isn't one of them. I just came here because the Imperial Academy defines people based on their skill.

The mage removed his thumb.

Where are you echoes? he asked, his tone softer than before.

I removed them. I didn't want to have any ties with anyone who wants to plan my whole life without having the skills for it.

Good speech. How long did you practice?

The question made Abella feel insulted, but she held her tongue.

Now tell me the real reason.

I wanted a challenge, she said. And to find a place where I could progress forward.

You're a countess, the battle mage noted. Many would consider that the peak of development, especially here.

Titles are like clothes. I want to sharpen my skills. The imperial legion is the only place I can do that.

You now what? I think youre full of crap.

Two large bracelets of ice formed round Abellas hands, minding them like massive shackles.

All you want is to show off.

Another pair appeared round her ankles.

Thats why you accomplished a hundred achievements.

One more appeared around her waist.

Thats why you became a noble without telling anyone.

One more formed around Abellas neck. The girl instantly reacted, slamming the ice shackles of her hands together. The force with which shed done it shattered the items into fragments, but moments later those fragments flew back into place, doubling in size as they did.

And now you come here, knowing full well that legionaries must forsake their last gate. You wanted to show everyone how superior you are to them, right?

No! Thats not what I came here for!

No? What, then?

The ice spread from her chains, enveloping the rest of her body. She could feel the icy chill and the pain that came with it. Her body trait was high enough to counter the effects for now, but her perception made the pain even more pronounced.

Why are you really here?

To prove Im better than anyone in my family! Abella shouted. To see how far I could get in a place that recognized skill and talent! To find others like me!

Suddenly, the ice vanished. Abella looked around. After such a scene, she was expecting everyone in the hall to be staring at her. They werent. As far as their reactions, body movements, even expressions were concerned, nothing had changed at all.

You see, my Academy also likes to show off, the battle mage said. Youve been surrounded by disfocus sphere. As far as everyone is concerned, Im giving you a hard time regarding your arrogance.

Arent you doing just that? Abella wondered.

Did you come here to hide from your family, or just to show off? he asked again.

Just to show off. There was no point in pretending at this point. Everything else was just a bonus. Deep inside, Abella wanted to become a legion general just so she could return to her family and show it in their faces.

Good. Youll go through the standard training, then officer training, and then, if you dont mess up, you might go further.

Thank you.

Of course, that's assuming you still want to join the legions.

Abella blinked. She was getting seriously mixed signals. Ever since she'd come here, she'd been ignored, accused of using artifacts, threatened, praised, and now now she wasn't even sure what this was.

Everyone who joins severs all bonds with their family, and that includes titles.

I know.

It's only at the emperor's leisure that you might restore them, if at all.

Yes, I understand. Abella was starting to get impatient.

And I wasn't joking about the level limit. Awakened up to level eighty can join, but only if they haven't passed through the gate. You're reached eighty-seven.

Clearly I'll vow not to level up anymore.

Sweet child, the battle mage sighed. That's not how it works. If you really want to join, you'll have to have your awakening powers sealed.

Abella felt a chill colder than any of the spells she had recently experienced. Every awakened dreaded having their powers sealed. Without awakening, they were nothing. They would retain their skills, their traits, even some of their abilities, but they would never be able to improve, to grow, or enter an awakened realm.

The greater the ambition, the greater the sacrifice. The mage placed her hand on her shoulder. Do you still want to see this through?

This was the moment of truth, the decision that would determine her life. However, in order to achieve what she wanted, Abella was asked to give up everything she had so far.

Chapter 838: Hannah's Story - Prodigy

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Imperial Academy, 35 years ago.**

Many things were said about becoming sealed off. Statistically, half of the people who went through it killed themselves or wish they had. The results were so extreme that compared to it banishment felt outright pleasant.

Feeling any worse? a mage asked.

Twice a day, one of them would visit her cell, making sure she was still alive. The first few weeks they'd even cast a few spells to make her forget what she had given up, but that had since stopped. The only spells now were healing spells, dealing with any injuries she had caused herself.

Are you feeling any worse? the mage repeated.

Abella looked up from her cot, giving the man a glance of hatred. She couldn't tell whether he'd been here to visit her before or anything about him. All that she saw was his dark mage's robe.

I'll take that as a no. Any wounds?



Not waiting for her answer, the man cast a spell. Green light surrounded Abella, wrapping her in warmth. Moments later, it was gone.

Try to eat something. The mage walked away.

Several trays of food lay on the floor, none of them were touched. Abella's body trait allowed her to last weeks without food and half that without water. That wasn't the hard part. The most painful element of losing one's awakened powers was the regret that followed. The day the countess had made the decision was the most difficult in her life. Since then, it had been progressively worse. The battle mage had warned her what might follow, but she had brushed it away, determined she was strong enough to take it. For the first few days, she even felt she had gone over the worst, but that was far from true. Now, twenty-seven days later, she felt worse than ever.

I warned you this would happen, a voice said in her head her own voice. You should have just walked back home. An ignored prodigy was better than no prodigy at all. Do you think anyone give a damn about you now? Both your family and the empire have forgotten you.

Shut up, Abella whispered.

*You'll spend the rest of your time in this cell, forgotten by the world. Or maybe you think you can walk out of here?*

In theory, there was nothing stopping her from doing so. Although locked, the cell bars could easily be bent by someone with a body trait of fifty or more. It was Abella herself that was the one preventing her escape. Right now, she didn't even have the desire to leave her so-called bed.

The girl placed her hand on the wall. Deep inside, she was still hoping that the awakening rectangle would appear, allowing her to enter its realm. Sadly, it didn't. Having her awakened powers gone felt as if she had a whole other set of limbs that had been severed. As if her entire body had been replaced by a set of clothes she was forced to wear for the rest of her life. They were good clothes continuing the metaphor allowing her to achieve more than any most awakened, possibly even some nobles, but the core remained missing.

A shadow of her former self That's what she was, and that's what they were going to call her.

The days dragged on. New trays of food would be brought, the old ones taken away. The night pot would be replaced with a new one and the cycle would continue.

Mages would check on her condition occasionally, attempting to start a conversation. It was always the new ones that tried. The old ones knew it was futile, so they just did their duties as quickly as possible, leaving her to the swamp she had placed herself in.

Eventually, her thirst and hunger grew to the point that she was forced to drink some water. It had no taste, but even if it had, Abella wouldn't have noticed.

One day, instead of the usual low-level mage, the battle mage arrived.

You're persistent, he said, as if it were a good thing. Most would have given up by now.

There was no response.

Actually, I lied. All would have given up in one way or another. The higher the level, the higher the pain. When the empire used to seal rebels as punishment, it was more difficult keeping them alive than dealing with the consequences of their rebellion. At least that's what the books claim.

Give up on your magic and find out, Abella hissed, her voice weak.

Mages lose their magic more than you'd think. Most of the time it isn't voluntary. They say it's worse than getting sealed, but I wouldn't know either way. He moved closer to the bars. What I do know is that you have good chances.

For the first time since she was here, Abella stirred. Her head felt heavy, but she still lifted it from the pillow, turning around towards the man.

You still haven't given up on your awakened powers.

Right. Abella let out a dry laugh. I'm doing so well.

The fact that you're doing so bad is proof of it. You haven't ended yourself. All your scrapes are from you trying to regain your powers. But at the same time, you haven't accepted it. When people lose something, they eventually come to terms with it. Most choose never to speak of it again, as if they've gone through a rebirth of sorts. If you had done that, you'd have embraced normality and walked out of this cell to join the ranks of the imperial legion. Instead, you remain.

Abella remained quiet. She had no idea why she did.

More notably, you never asked for your powers back, the mage said.

There's no way to unseal an awakened.

Oh, but there is. In fact, there are several ways. And even if there weren't, most sealed would have asked, nonetheless. Magic is the trait of exceptions, so you should have been begging me to find a way to return things to what they were.

I know that game, she kissed. You've just saying that to make me squirm. Showing a glimpse of hope before taking it away.

What do you actually want, Abella?

What did she want? The girl wasn't sure anymore. She had come here to prove she was better than everyone else. She was so convinced in it that she had forsaken the very thing that had made her a prodigy. Or had she?

There were dozens of awakened in her family. Her brothers, like she, had been raised with all the benefits nobility had to offer. Their awakening had been ensured, as was their rise to level twenty. All of them had received dozens of echo trainers, tutors, and advisers, making sure they developed in the most efficient way possible, and yet out of everyone, Abella was the only one who had passed level forty at the age of twelve. Her brothers and the other children of her family had initially attempted to catch up, but then quickly given up, remaining in the mid-twenties. She too had sensed the gap grow, which was why she had stopped leveling up and focused on achievement hunting instead.

No, it wasn't her awakening powers that made her a prodigy. Quite the opposite. It was her determination and innate skill that had made her a domain ruler, even if she wasn't supposed to be.

Try to eat something, the battle mage turned around. And just so you know, you aren't the greatest prodigy the city has seen in the last few years. You're still close, though.

Eight hours later, the visits of the standard mages continued as usual.

Feeling any worse? the mage asked the usual question.

This time, though, they received a different answer.

No, Abella said. The worst passed this morning.

It was the smallest of steps. The girl didn't feel well by any means, but she knew one thing she had reached the bottom. From here on things could only get better, and slowly they did. Each week seemed a bit more tolerable than the last. Abella never forgot the loss, but continued despite it, as if fighting the world. An unawakened in name, she pushed on and on a bit every day.

First, she went back to eating, which took some getting used to. Following that, she started exercising in her cell, restoring the muscle mass she had lost. Then, three months after she had entered the cell, she just stood up and walked out. As it turned out, the door wasn't even locked.

The corridor continued along a series of cells, all of them empty, until it reached a massive wooden door. Just as Abella reached to open it, the door swung to the side, revealing the battle mage, two imperial soldiers, one officer, and two servants holding a uniform and an imperial sword.

So, the battle mage began with a semi smile. How do you feel?

Well, the girl replied. I take it I can join the legion now?

You still need training, but yes. Congratulations lieutenant.

Lieutenant? Abella asked. I thought all candidates started as trainees.

It'll be a waste of your talents. You've already earned your rank. From here on you'll learn to be a commander.

The countess could only stare. This sounded too good to be true. She had expected a level of recognition after making it so far; the Imperial Academy had invested too much time and effort for it not to be the case, yet gaining a title off the bat simply wasn't done.

What's the catch? she asked.

You're expected to make up for everything that you missed on your own, the battle mage replied. The imperial legion has high standards to maintain. Those that don't maintain them usually end up dead.

That's all?

As I told you before, the empire loves people who show off as long as they have what it takes.

No self-respecting awakened would take orders from a sealed.

That depends entirely on you. We're here to make use of your potential. Everything else you must achieve on your own. Is it challenging enough for you?

The girl nodded. There was no way it could be worse than what she went through.

Splendid. And one last thing. There are trinkets to make up for your recent shortcomings. Prove that you're suited for them.

With that, Abella's admission to the imperial legions was complete. She was taken directly to the second floor of the officers' training building. Each person there was given their own room, a lot smaller than what she had in her family estate. Only the basic necessities were present: a bed, a desk, a wardrobe, and several shelves filled with books and scrolls of the training materials she was expected to learn on her own. There was no food or water visible, no plates, or washing implements of any kind. Legionaries were expected to eat, shit, and wash outside of their rooms following a precise schedule. Officers had their own dining room and bath, with which their privileges abruptly ended.

Another servant came to the room, bringing a few towels as well as a set of underwear and nightwear. All other clothes, as she said, would be provided to the countess in the course of training.

Once she was gone, Abella closed the door, latched it and took one long look at the room. Sunlight was pouring in from the window, preventing the light crystals on the walls from glowing.

So, this is it, the girl said.

This small room would be her home until she was assigned to the field. It wasn't much by any stretch of the imagination, but somehow she felt more pride in having earned it than anything else in her life.

Lieutenant Usec, she said out loud. Legion officer of the empire.

Chapter 839: Hannah's Story - Persistence

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Wilderness, 31 years ago.**

Don't let the small ones get through! Captain Balasta yelled.

Three squads of legionaries spread out, rushing to stop the flow of cracklings. Even in their present numbers, the creatures were incapable of causing anyone present any real harm, but all it took was one to escape for it to cause a nuisance to the nearby settlements.

Carter, take care of the chainling! Usec, stay as backup.

Sir, Abelle confirmed.

She had gotten used to being left behind. For better or worse, it was just as she feared. Neither the excellence displayed in training, nor her superior skills, had made anyone trust her on the battlefield. They respected her. Rumors of her being a noble who had sealed her awakening powers to join had spread long before she had emerged from her cell. Yet, just as people were fearful, they weren't sure they could fully rely on her.

Sir, I'd recommend someone checking out the area they came from. If all of them came from the same layer, there might be more of them keeping low.

The Orders probably on the way, the captain ignored her. They'll deal with it.

Or the next legion patrolling this area, Abelle added mentally.

What do you think?

Technically, Abelle was second in command. That meant that she could, in theory, order anyone other than her captain. In practice, even the sergeants had more authority than her, even after shed saved their lives on several occasions.

Looks solid enough, she said, in her typical calm fashion. Chainlings small, so Carter shouldnt have any troubles with it. A few dozen cracklings will slip through, but I doubt theyll near any settlements. Maybe a village or two at most.

Why so pessimistic?

The soldiers are slow, she said without excuses. And you only order me in battle when theres no other choice.

So eager to fight.

The captain frowned. He was three times her age, achieving his rank through a series of battlefield promotions. According to the rumors, he had initially been a sergeant whod saved the right people at the right time. Abelle had acknowledged his skills, just as she had acknowledged theyd never get better. The man was a mere level fifty awakened, whod already reached the limit of his traits. His family was insignificant, which kept him retiring in the capital. If Abelle were in his place, shed offered her services to one of the archdukes. Outside the capital, they were the best one could hope for, and were snobbish enough to take retired imperial captains in their employ.

Think you can get them all? He glanced at her sideways.

Without a doubt.

Okay, prove me wrong.

Sir! Abelle dashed before her captain had the chance to change his mind. Her speed was roughly four times greater than that of the others, making her appear like a blur on the battlefield.

The cracklings were in beast form, arranged like a back. There were two ways for them to try and escape the encirclement: either rely on speed and superior numbers, or merge together and rely on strength and surprise. The second would have been preferable: at least then the soldiers would be able to stop all of them without issue.

Abelles target was the leader of the pack. As long as she killed him, the rest would fall in disarray, giving her time to kill them off. Maybe some of the newbies would be pissed at her for stealing their kill, but theyd get over it. Only the results were what mattered.

No rectangles appeared as the lieutenant slashed through the crackling. Since her spark wasnt as strong as when she was awakened, the empire had given her a relic sword to compensate. The silvery alloy sliced through the black beast-like silhouette, transforming it into two puffs of smoke that quickly faded away.

At least they arent cutligns. Abelle kept on running forward, joining the tail of the back.

Several of the creatures noticed her, leaping in her direction, dozens of fangs on fangs bare throughout their entire form.

Their effort was completely wasted, of course. If they were a person, Abelle would pity them. Her blade followed a single arc as she moved, slashing three cracklings in a single motion. Every instinct told her that the best solution would be to perform a line attack, but that was strongly discouraged in the real world. There were too many people with low reaction traits that could get hurt.

Sparktip, Abelle drew a dagger, covering the tip of the blade with a faint glow. She then threw it, hitting the pack leader in the side. The weapon was too weak to kill the creature, but it caused enough damage for the beast to lose speed.

You lost, the girl thought, boosting her speed even further.

An unfortunate legionary chose the worst time to show initiative, firing three dartbows at the pack. The bolts were easily avoided as both the creatures and Abelle shifted direction, letting them fly by.

Abelle hated such types of people most of all: too incompetent to succeed in a fight, but too arrogant to admit it to themselves. Most of the rookies started that way before they got a heavy dose of reality beaten into them. Once this was over, Abelle was going to see to it personally.

Just stay back, she said beneath her breath as she sliced through the cutlings, reaching the leader.

The creature wasn't larger than the rest, but it was a lot more adaptive. Noticing it had become a target, tendrils shot out of it in all directions. Some of them hit other cracklings nearby, forcing them to merge.

A new beast towered, clawed tentacles slashing in Abelle's direction.

The lieutenant's sword seemed to split in ten, slicing through the creature like a cat's cradle. A blink of the eye later, she had passed through, and the crackling leader, even with all the additional creatures merged within, was reduced to smoke.

Still gripping her sword, Abelle turned around. She could easily kill off the rest of the pack and even help the other lieutenant in his fight against the chainling. Yet, there didn't seem to be any point.

Take care of the rest, she ordered, sheathing her weapon. It wasn't like the legion would waste time examining the area, anyway.

The fight was over in under twenty minutes. The chainling had proved slightly more challenging than expected, requiring that the captain step in. Abelle didn't. Then again, she wasn't asked to.

A hundred and twelve of them altogether, Lieutenant Carter Optih said. Nothing much.

There haven't been chainlings this close to the empire, Abelle added. There might be something else going on.

The Crippled? Carter smirked. He was that type of guy who was brought up believing the emperor was almost as strong as the Moons, thus immune to the Star and all of its spawn. Doubt it.

Either way, the captain raised his voice. It's the Orders' problem now. Get everyone packed and ready. We start our march to the capital within the hour.

Sir! Both stood to attention, then turned around to convey the orders to the rest of the troops.

Abelle, the captain said. Stay for a moment.

That was never good. In her experience, when someone asked her to stay, it was to point out all the mistakes shed made. When there were no mistakes to be discussed, some were invented.

Waiting for Carter to move further away, Abelle reluctantly turned around.

Yes, sir? she asked, hoping against hope that the conversation would be pleasant.

Good work with the cracklings.

Sir? This was a surprise.

Hopefully, the kids will keep what they say in mind next time they face Star spawn. He added a slight chuckle. All we can ask is that one or two of them improve thanks to this.

Yeah. Right, sir. What are you going on about?

If any of the cracklings was to escape, or the chainling had killed any of the legionaries, there would be a reason for the captain to act like this. Thats not what had happened. With the exception of a few sightings, nothing remarkable had happened during the patrol. In all cases, the legion had killed off the monsters theyd encountered with no losses, and left the mopping up to someone else which was the standard policy.

Ill be retiring after this one, the captain continued.

Its about time, Abelle couldnt help herself. Sir, she quickly added.

Always speaking your mind. The man shook his head with a bitter smile. Even when you dont have to.

Congratulations, then, she didnt back down. Where are you going, sir?

Im leaving the legion altogether. Thats not what I wanted to talk to you about. There was a long pause. You know that Carter doesnt have what it takes to become a captain yet.

Abelle nodded.

You do, but youll never be given it.

The girl just stood there as she started to comprehend what he was saying. The reason he had asked her to stay wasnt because of what would happen to him. Once again, she would be skipped for promotion. In the past, her age was cited as a reason. Having a teenage commander, who was no longer awakened at that, would have been demoralizing to everyone else. What would the reason be this time?

I worked my way up the ranks, she tried to protest.

You want to know the real reason? Its because you rejected your nobility. You should have never been allowed to join in the first place. The legions supposed to serve the emperor and the nobles of the capital.

Im no longer a noble, sir. Abelle clenched her fists.

That's it. What exactly are you? You're not a noble, you're not even an awakened anymore, and you're definitely not a legionary. You've turned yourself into a curiosity.

I could break your neck, the girl thought. She had the skills to win despite the captain's awakened powers. With a little bit of effort, she could potentially take the entire legion, or at least flee before they could react. Of course, such an action would be stupid. If she did anything of the sort, the Academy would send mages after her.

Everyone loves prodigies they could rationalize, the captain added. You, they can't rationalize. You're not supposed to be so strong. You're not supposed to have survived your sealing.

The battle mage didn't think so.

You're not a mage. If you were, people would understand.

So, that was it? Another made-up reason to keep her from assuming command. The Imperial Academy had taught her the theory. She had spent years in the wilderness acquiring practical knowledge, and yet it was never going to be enough. Abelle would continue to serve on as an eternal lieutenant, eventually earning more respect than the captains she assisted, yet never being given the title of one herself. So much for proving her skills to the world.

I won't leave the legion, she said with determination.

That's obvious. You don't have anywhere to go.

Is there any specific advice you asked me to stay for, sir?

No. I don't know you well enough to give advice. No one does. I just thought it was high time someone told you the truth.

And you conveniently did so just before leaving the legion, Abelle thought.

That will be all, Lieutenant. The captain looked away. Check on the troops before we head back.

Sir.

Rumors of the captain's retirement were quick to spread throughout the legion. Nearly everyone agreed that it was about time. There was also a healthy amount of envy since, in general, it was rare for a sergeant to achieve officer status. However, the main topic of conversation was Abelle. Everyone knew of her circumstances, so there was a lot of speculation whether she'd take over. It was nearly unanimous that Carter didn't have the skills, but at least he was normal.

The whispers continued all the way to the capital. Most of the time they were conducted in the awakened realms of items, so that Abelle couldn't hear. Every now and again, though, someone would slip and make a comment in the real world. When that happened, all the girl could do was grit her teeth and pretend she'd missed it.

Events took place exactly as the captain had said they would. A day after his retirement was announced, a new captain was appointed to the legion—one of the other bright stars of the Imperial Academy, but without Abelle's baggage. Carter was to remain as second in command, while Abelle was to her great surprise summoned to the Imperial Palace.



Initially, she expected to be brought to the office of some imperial bureaucrat where she'd be handed her next assignment, along with a lot of subtle insults. Instead, one of the city's overseers emerged a few steps away.

Always a pleasure, your grace, the woman said. Her appearance was that of a twenty-year-old, with short platinum blond hair, and the usual black overseer outfit.

I'm not a noble anymore. Abelle tried to remain calm.

Titles are for life, regardless of anything else. She took the lieutenant's hand. Don't let go until we reach the gardens.

The gardens? The lieutenant flinched.

Yes. The emperor has personally asked to see you.

Chapter 840: Hannah's Story - Prize

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Imperial Gardens, 31 years ago.**

It was the second time that Abelle had been to the imperial gardens. The first one was at the age of twelve, when her father had brought her along to show the emperor what a prodigious daughter he had.

Abelle remembered the emperor being incredibly tall and far more powerful than anyone in her family could be.

Two bladerers made of moon platinum accompanied her along the path of sapphire tiles. It was said that the garden never kept the same appearance twice. From what Abelle could see, that seemed to be true.

As they walked, a small orchard moved from one side to the path to the other, revealing a small mountain made entirely out of moss. If this had happened anywhere else, Abelle would have thought it was done to intimidate her. In this case, that couldn't be true: the emperor didn't need any help in making people fear him.

If it isn't little Abelle, a clear male voice came from the distance. Its source was too far away to be seen, especially with all the trees, bushes, and other plants, but there could be no doubt who that was. You've grown quite a bit.

On cue, the bladerers turned back, leaving Abelle in the middle of the path. Plants moved in soon after, leaving her only the option to move forward.

Internally, Abelle swallowed. With each step she took, she felt more and more anxious. The path led straight forward into a forest of giant reeds. Walking through them was almost like walking through a battlefield of swords: visibility was limited and, at any moment, one expected a series of surprise attacks from all directions.

Halfway through, the reeds suddenly shot into the air, merging together to create an arch of living plants. The normal reaction was for Abelle to go for her weapon; her self-control was stretched but managed to keep her from committing an unacceptable offense.

Told you she wouldn't fall for it, the emperor said, a few hundred feet away.

Standing over seven feet tall, the ruler of the empire was trimming the branch edges of a massive tree with such speed that for the inexperienced it would seem that his hand was merely passing by the branches. A short distance from him was another figure an old man dressed in a decorated purple robe.

The archmage, Abelle thought. She had never seen the man in person, despite his many visits to the imperial palace, but even she could tell who he was.

Dont worry, youre not in trouble, the emperor said, as if reading Abelles mind. Quite the opposite, rather.

Familiar with both noble and legion etiquette, Abelle instantly fell down on one knee. As a countess, maybe she could have gotten away from a curtsy. Right now, she was an officer of his legions, and as such, had to know her place.

We heard of the sacrifice you made in order to join the legion. The emperor kept on trimming the branches. That would make you the only person to do so since I took the throne.

I live to serve you, Emperor, she said without hesitation.

The archmage sighed.

It must have been difficult to give up your nobility and awakened powers, the emperor continued. Especially since you didnt have to. The Order of the Suns would have taken you in. Theyre always on the lookout for talent and you would have fit the bill perfectly.

You honor me with your praise, Emperor.

The girl had no idea what the Order of the Suns was, but was certain that they had never approached her. The only ones who had tried were some of the guilds of the imperial capital. Technically, she was still a member of a few, but given that Abelle no longer had any relations to her family, its possible they had discreetly kicked her out.

Killed any chainlings?

Three, Emperor.

If you had taken things into your own hands a week ago, they would have been four. The rulers tone suddenly shifted. You had the superior skills and the better tactical knowledge. Why didnt you take things into your own hands?

I wasnt the Legions captain, Emperor.

True, and the way things are going, you never will be.

For an instant Abelle felt as if her heart had frozen solid. The old captain had been right. Shed never earn her own command. Was that the reason the emperor had called her here? Hardly. From this point, there was only one thing that could follow her being removed from the Imperial Legion altogether.

Are you aware that we had to personally approve your joining? For the first time, the emperor looked at her. Battle mages remain mages, but they work directly under me. We were intrigued by someone whod be willing to make the sacrifice, so we allowed it to happen. There were times when

we thought that our trust had been misplaced. Thankfully, you managed to survive. What do you think, Adzorg?

Worse than some, better than most, the archmage replied, not seeming particularly impressed. At least she knows what she isnt.

Harsh as always. The emperor laughed. Hes still skeptical. Like you, hes a prodigy with something to prove to the world. And just like you, he doesnt see his shortcomings.

Abelle wasnt able to resist glancing at the archmage. Other than his robes, there didnt seem to be anything special about the man. The fact that he had risen to his current position meant that he undoubtedly was more powerful than, if not all, than at least most mages.

We have been looking for a suitable candidate to be his personal guard. Something which he has stubbornly refused. However, while the Academy is separate from the crown, its still within my empire.

The emperor snapped his fingers. With her heightened senses, Abelle was able to catch the sound of metallic wings splitting the air. Moments later, a bladerer landed twenty steps away. The blades that formed its wings glittered in the light, making it even more threatening than it was.

We have decided to make you captain of the Archmages Archive, the emperor said. You will be responsible for ensuring the safety of all the Academys most valuable and dangerous treasures. Of course, I strongly consider my dear Adzorg to be one of those treasures.

That was a very peculiar way of looking at it. If a common were to use such logic, he would have been laughed out of most towns. When it came to the emperor, everyone was left with the sole option of nodding and accepting it as law.

This is a challenging task. Youve shown that you cannot be bribed or threatened. Now, only one thing remainswhether you have the skill to take on the role.

The blades forming the bladerers wings spread out.

This will be your opponent. The emperor crossed his arms. Defeat it and Ill declare you a captain. Fail and youll be sent back to our legions, where youll spend the rest of your life as a lieutenant.

Abelle smiled. Most would have been terrified at the prospect of fighting such a construct. Bladerers were considered to be more lethal than metalins and golems. That wasnt true, of course, but their ability to fly along with multiple sharp blades was enough to make seasoned warriors prefer flight to fight. After being forced to remain as backup during her patrols in the wilderness, Abelle was itching for a real fight, especially if it were a challenge.

Drawing her sword before the bladerer could fully span its wings, Abelle had already charged forward. Not knowing the weak spots of the construct, she went directly for its right shoulder. Her blade split the air in a perfect arc slash.

Seeing her intent, the bladerer leaped up in an attempt to decrease the distance between the two. Abelles attack landed, slicing off the entire right arm of the creature. Sadly, it was a moment too late. The blades had already unlinked from the shoulder spot, flying towards the lieutenant along a spiral pattern.

Too slow, she thought, spinning through the air.

Each of her strikes was enough to cut through stone, yet only managed to push the moon platinum blades back several dozen feet. There was no time to relax, though. No sooner was one wave of blades scattered than another took its place.

Deflecting several attacks, Abelle stepped on a blade, using its force to push herself back and away from the bladerer.

The normal approach for fighting flying monsters capable of ranged attacks was to decrease the distance and focus on rapid melee attacks. Yet, there was also an advantage. Allowing her enemy fly up in the air allowed Abelle to use a line attack without fearing consequences.

Like strike, Abelle whispered, slashing in the direction of the bladerer.

Dozens of blades scattered as the line of destruction struck the constructs torso. The damage was significant, though not enough to destroy it outright.

Damn it! Abelle hissed. If she had still been awakened, she would have added spark to the attack, ensuring that the magic powering the entity would fizzle out. Now she needed a second attack to finish the job.

Leaping to the side, the lieutenant quickly followed up the attack with several more line strikes. Yet, the slight delay had allowed the bladerer to respond and perform a line attack of its own.

No! Abelle shouted.

The two attacks moved towards each other. Even now, she could see that they were going to miss each other, reaching their targets. Abelles strike was going to hit the bladerers torso again, likely finishing it off this time. Its attack, though, while missing her, was going to slice the entire garden and parts of the palace beneath it.

Frantically, the lieutenant performed another line attack in an attempt to counter the constructs. Before she could, purple filled the sky, like a thin layer of glass emerging above the garden.

Two massive bangs followed. Destroyed by the second strike, the bladerer burst open like a firework. Simultaneously, the layer of purple shattered, though not before soaking up the entire force of the aerial attack.

Terrified, the girl looked in the direction of the archmage. She had expected him to have cast the spell. Yet, the person who had his hand extended was the emperor himself.

Getting a bit slow in your old age? the emperor asked, looking at the archmage.

My apologies, Emperor. Ive never been one for combat spells.

Which is precisely why we insisted on your being protected. The ruler then looked at the garden. Despite surviving the worst-case scenario, there still were metal bits and pieces scattered throughout it, not to mention multiple blade fragments. Seems well have to redecorate. He lowered his hand. You could have done a lot better. It had seventeen openings you could have used to destroy it before it left the ground.

M-my apologies, Emperor, Abelle could only say. She hadn't seen one. Possibly the emperor forgot that she didn't have the ability to see magic.

We suppose it was to be expected since you're no longer an awakened. Still, you did as I asked. I'll leave you two to iron out the details.

When a person said I'll leave you it usually meant that they would be the one to go. With this being the ruler of the empire, both the archmage and Abelle quickly got the hint and started walking away, all the time keeping their faces towards the emperor.

Not a bad fight, the archmage whispered once they had entered the ride forest. I expected you'd be a lot flashier.

Flashiness as for awakened, Abelle said. I need to be efficient.

Thank the Moons. The last one kept on fighting for an hour, desperate to display all the skills he had. It's a wonder that the emperor didn't throw him out.

What happened to him? Abelle's curiosity got the better of her.

He was made lieutenant of the palace guard, Adzorg said with a snort. I guess he saw it as a promotion of sorts.

Bushes and trees filled the path as the two kept walking back, blocking the emperor entirely from view. Even so, they kept to the palace protocol. Nobles had been known to spend decades in prison items for less.

What about me? Abelle asked.

You heard the ruler. You're my captain now. The man gave her a pat on the back. It felt strangely warm, as if done by a close friend.

The emperor was right, though, the archmage added. You could have killed it off faster. Whole clusters of magic threads were entirely exposed. When we get to the archives, I'll make you a trinket to see

No, Abelle interrupted. No trinkets. I can't afford my skills to rust.

Tools don't always make you weaker. Just like your sword.

Maybe, but I prefer to rely on my own strength for now.

Oh? The man smiled. Is that all you have to say?

Sir, Abelle added. I prefer to rely on my own strength for now, sir.