

## Leveling up 851

### Chapter 851: Domain Forging

Fields of grass extended as far as the eye could see. Hills poked out here and there like pimples on a teenager.

So empty, Dallion thought.

Turning in the direction of the sun, he could see a sea in the far distance. There wasn't a single whiff of salt in the air.

That's how domains usually start out, Vihrogon emerged in his dryad form. A blank canvas for you to fill, one way or another.

Forging a province never is easy, Dallion whispered, remembering what his grandfather had said in a dream.

Sure it is. The dryad put his arm round Dallion's shoulders. It's the managing that's difficult.

Managing?

Eventually, you'll be in command of thousands. Keeping them content while not messing things up is always tricky. Why do you think people rely on limiting echoes so much?

That was an interesting question. Some used physical force to control their subjects, others relied on money and luxuries, but most resorted to mental means. Dallion had an advantage there: he had music skills with which to nudge people in the direction he wanted. From what he could tell, that was a significant factor of House Elazni keeping its influence within the empire. Their rivals, in turn, relied on money to achieve the same. Try as he might, Dallion couldn't think of any notable family that used force. The capital was full of them, of course; in fact, they composed ninety percent of the nobles, if not more. Yet, all of them were nothing but pawns for the softer houses, playing to their tunes.

Let's start with the simple part, Dallion said.

Ten feet away, stone walls emerged from the ground, forming a square enclosure. As they rose, holes emerged, growing into openings that would hold doors and windows. A new layer shot out perpendicular from the walls, forming a floor and ceiling, as the rest kept going up.

It was like concrete being poured, just without the actual concrete. Dallion had never had any interest in construction, but had a basic idea how things were supposed to work or close to it from middle school and online videos. Floor by floor, the structure kept rising until abruptly stopping at the fifth floor.

Wow. Vihrogon moved his hand off Dallion's shoulder, taking a few steps towards the building. That's the worst house I've seen ever.

I'm still training, Dallion grumbled. And it's not finished. I haven't added decorations yet.

I don't think the Moons can make that many decorations to cover up that catastrophe.

So, I need a better architectural plan. The issue was that Dallion had used his scholar skills for the purpose. Without them, the dimensions and stability of the structure would have been messed up.

Thats not the issue. Youre trying to combine two approaches, taking the worst parts of each.

Im only human, not a dryad like you.

Your problem has nothing to do with racial abilities. Give me control.

With a sigh, Dallion gestured to the dryad to go on with it.

The outlines of a structure appeared a hundred feet from the existing creation. They werent made of stone or wood, or even any other material. It all was a blueprint made of magic threads, but it wasnt a spell. Academy spellcraft was called the skill of exceptions, but what it did was in effect force the threads of the world to do whatever they were instructed. Thats why mages had to learn so many rules and instructions.

Natural magic, in contrast, asked them to achieve the result the person wanted. It could be said to be collaborative, but that would imply sentence.

Building from within your realm only requires logic and imagination, the dryad said as the magic threads spread, making more complex and elaborate designs. You think of what you want, then release it for reality to complete. Building in the real world is the opposite: you physically create what you want and have the idea become mirrored within the realm. What you just did was try to build the parts without thinking about what you want.

The blueprint was all but ready now similar to Dallions mansion in the imperial capital, though larger.

This is what I want to achieve. Im not worried how it will be. Here, all I have to do is create a perfect mental image and He snapped his fingers.

Purple dust exploded from the structure, as if it were shedding millions of pixels. When they faded away, the structure was there, perfect and complete, putting Dallions monstrosity to shame.

Of course, nothings stopping you from using your Vihrogon glanced at the incomplete stone shell. method.

Fine, fine. I get the point.

The stone building was pulled back into the ground. A moment later, so was the dryads mansion. If Dallion was to learn how to do things, he had to do so by himself.

Just imagine, he said, more to himself than the dryad.

## **DOMAIN FORGING SKILLS ACTIVATED**

### **Follow the blueprint markers for best efficiency.**

Dozens of structure outlines emerged, all stacked one over the other. An ordinary person would have found it impossible to make them out, but for Dallion they were clear, as if they had been placed one next to the other.

All the buildings he had been to not only since hed entered this world, but even going far back as his childhood on Earth were there. Some were incomplete, some were segments of larger structures, but enough for Dallion to get a good idea of what he wanted.

Well, thats new, the dryad said.

Domain forging skills? he asked, turning to Vihrogon.

Must be you reaching the skill cap. Im only able to build things I have in the past.

Intriguing. If Dallion wanted to be lazy about it, he could simply copy structures he was familiar with and be done with it.

Curious, he focused on the blueprint of the original Icepicker guild. All other blueprints faded away, like discarded combat splitting instances. A moment later, the structure came into being, solidifying just as the dryad mansion had.

## **BUILDING CREATED - GUILDHALL**

### **DAL THE BUILDER**

**(+2 Mind, +2 Perception)**

**Youve created your first building. Everyone gets one of these, so dont get cocky.**

Two blue rectangles emerged.

### **GUILDHALL (Level 3)**

**Domain: SANDSTORM**

**Guardian: BLADE SPIDER**

**Dimensions: 60x80x60 feet**

**Wall width: 0.6 feet**

**Floors: 4+1**

**Rooms: 62**

**Doors: 48**

**Windows: 35**

**Secret Areas: NONE**

A white rectangle followed, appearing just above.

This was the most detail Dallion had seen regarding structures. Normally, hed only get a brief description. The guardian was the thing with the stats, given that they were the soul of the area or item. Having the power to create things on such a scale clearly was different.

I really have reached a different level, he thought.

*Feeling nostalgic, dear boy?*

Adzorg asked. *Not that I have anything against the choice. Its a building worth having. It cant be your main building, though.*

It isnt, Dallion replied. But its close.

Casting a flight spell, Dallion rose into the air to get a better view of his domain. His aether sight helped him see the border between the realm proper and the false infinity that surrounded it. The effort caused slight pain in his temples a sensation he hadn't experienced in quite a while.

The first structures he built were eight guard forts, positioned at equal distances along the wall. Even if they'd be empty for a while, Dallion preferred to lock the space so as not to have to restructure things later. While mostly the same, a few unique characteristics were added just for the sake of identification.

When it came to the river, the fort had a dock added nearby as well. The wall there was removed entirely, for aesthetic reasons.

After waiting for a few minutes to confirm that he wouldn't get an achievement for the first ten buildings, Dallion proceeded to build a well with a fountain and a Village Chiefs Mansion mansion with running water. Come to think of it, that was something that he'd have to add to the existing buildings as well. As easy as it was to construct buildings he was familiar with, their amenities left a bit to be desired.

What do you think, Harp? Dallion asked. Getting somewhere, or not quite?

The nymph didn't reply. Her thoughts were still on the war taking place on the other side of the empire.

Dallion wanted to find a way to console her, but it wasn't easy knowing that one of the contenders for potential Moonhood was a nymph as well. While in the future, he'd still need to cross that bridge at some point it was inevitable that once he'd established himself within the empire, he'd have to fight Harp's kind on a massive scale.

You'll need an arena, Vihrogon said, shifting the topic. What's the Hero of Nerosal without an arena?

No one remembers that, Dallion shook his head.

If you want to succeed, you better start thinking of ways to remind them. You're a count, but also the Hero of Nerosal, battlemage of the Academy, and a full hunter. Titles hold power the more substance behind them, the better.

And favored of the Green Moon, Dallion added mentally.

Concentrating, he tried to imagine an awakening altar, but the blueprint refused to appear. None of the ones Dallion's had visited emerged, not even the deserted five-level one near Dherma village.

How do I build awakening shrines? Dallion asked.

The dryad whistled. That's a big one. I have no idea. Never had one in my domain. Of course, I didn't spend too much time running my village. It became boring fast, so I gave it to a relative.

Dallion could sense there was more to the story, but chose not to pry.

The Order might know, Vihrogon continued. Weren't you told that they'd help you build up your domain?

I doubt that's what they meant. And even if it was, Dallion had mixed feelings on letting the Order establish a presence in his domain. They weren't the type of organization that let something go once they had it.

Even so, Dallion created the blueprint of a Green Moon statue, positioning it at the entrance in the outer wall. He didnt entertain the thought of adding a coliseum, but added a hunter inn; more specifically, he recreated Dirohs hunter inn as he initially remembered it. Although not sure how shed react, he was going to need skilled people for his settlement, and hunters were better than most. Many of the hunter dens had been destroyed or abandoned because of the war and the demands of local nobles, causing them to choose the wilderness. A safe place to rest without having to worry about politics was just the thing they needed.

Descending back to the ground, Dallion looked at what hed created. Logically, there was no reason for him to be tired. He hadnt done any physical work or even cast massive spells. Yet, the effort had drained him. His eyes and head were thumping in pain and even healing magic had little effect.

Better stop here and take a rest, Vihrogon said. You can continue later.

Right.

Dallion took one look at his realm. From inside, it looked like a structure scattered throughout the world. Even neighboring forts were so far from one another that they were no longer visible. In the real world, the distance was going to be a lot smaller. The question was whether the structures themselves would be. It was time to find out.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion left his realm. Reality shifted, then settled.

The campfire was still burning, cooking the branchhare meat under Rubys diligent supervision. Several buildings were present, scattered throughout the area, though well within view. Less impressive than theyd been in the area realm, they still rose up majestically, in defiance of the wilderness that surrounded them.

Anyone entering your realm will see them as mountains, Vihrogon said.

How can you be sure? Dallion asked.

*Because Im looking at them. They are the vision you want to present to the world, and youre starting to think big.*

## Chapter 852: Magic Infiltration

Diroh reacted rather well at the sight of her own inn. Dallion could see bittersweet emotions emanating from her, along with a touch of eagerness. She wanted to see it on the inside, but at the same time didnt want to show it.

Gleam, on the other hand, was as merciless as always.

Is that it? she almost scuffed as she fluttered above the settlement in her fully sized majestic form. Not absolutely terrible. Its missing more bits than its got.

I know. Dallion took a bite of the branchhare meat. It was slightly bitter, as that type of meat usually was. Ill add houses when people settle in.

Right. The shardfly flew down, changing into her chosen humanoid form. Wholl you get?

I have a few ideas.

While the emperor had granted Dallion the right to get people from the entire empire, it wasnt as simple. Most Archdukes would refuse to follow the order, citing the war, or rather cripple the

people requested just out of principle. That left one option: to find such people whose departure would cost less than the trouble of having them stay.

Anything interesting in the mountain? Dallion asked.

Not much. Diroh kept looking at the fire. Doesn't look like anything special. I cast a few spells to find rare ores, but didn't sense a thing. There might be gems if you're into that thing.

There's lots of playful creatures, Gleam added. They're not afraid to attack.

Anything I've seen?

Don't think so.

That was an interesting opportunity for Dallion to boost his zoology and herbalism skills at some point. For the moment, he needed to do two things: get people and return to the capital to reclaim Adzorg. After that, he'd try to make the place into a town.

You can always move your home village here, Di suggested. You've told me you freed them from

No, Dallion interrupted. They're better where they are.

Are you worried you'd endanger them?

There was a part of Dallion's mind that was worried about certain people, mostly those of his family, but that wasn't the main reason. He wanted to do as little as possible with them, especially his grandfather. There was a time when he'd trusted the old man beyond anything else, seeing in him the only person that could understand and help him. With each new piece of information he learned, the image was tarnished more and more.

I already know who I'll invite. He stood up. Will you be able to handle this place while I'm gone?

You're leaving again. The ice fury didn't even bother to frown. What a surprise.

Only because I have faith in you.

Dallion summoned his aura sword and waved it several times through the air. Multiple spell circles formed, combining with each other until one massive sphere spell was complete. The ball of purple light fell to the ground. Upon contact, the massive clay head of a golem emerged. Magic threads surrounded it, pulling the creature out as if it were an overgrown turning. It wasn't exactly an imperial golem, but adequate enough to deal with lesser threats.

I've also linked myself to the realm, so if you think there'll be trouble, just let me know. Dallion turned to the shardflies. Okay?

Ruby flicked his wings, while Gleam just stared back.

Di. He paused for a moment. I'm giving you the settlement.

Really? The word was drenched in sarcasm. Thanks. It feels just like home.

That's not what I mean. I'm giving you the settlement. I'll still take care of growth and other things, but there are other things I must focus on, at least for the moment.

I know what you meant and Im done being other peoples replacement. First my mentor, then Ji, then March.

Hey. Dallion went up to her and placed his hand on the furys shoulder. You wont be replacing me, he lied. Youre just helping out. There are things you just cant do, not yet. Besides he gently pushed up her chin, making her raise her head and look him in the eyes you need to spread your wings.

A faint smile formed on Dirohs face.

Ill bring Adzorg with me when I return. Dallion stepped away. Maybe a few more familiar faces as well. Saying that, he cast a flight spell and rose up into the sky.

Even you must know she has a crush on you, Vihrogon said as Dallion flew to the south.

I know. Its just puppy love.

*I think shes a bit too old for puppy love. Still, you know best. Ive given up offering advice. Its never certain youll take it, anyway.*

*I listen to all your advice.*

Only because you have no choice, Vihrogon laughed.

Changing his direction slightly to the east, Dallion went over the massive forest. He could sense the vast number of creatures beneath. Some of them he was unfamiliar with, but most were what one would expect. Judging by his art and scholar skills, it would be a while before he went over familiar territory. Yet, soon enough, he sensed something elsethe presence of domains.

Small monasteries, each holding from a few hundred people to thousands, started popping up in the wilderness. They were alone, isolated from the known world, yet following a strict pattern. Now, he understood why the Order had asked him to settle where he didthey were using him as another piece in their grid.

Someone wants to explore the entire world, Dallion thought.

Noon came and went. By Dallions estimates, hed approach his destination in another hour. Since he was a noble now, he wouldnt have any problems with the locals. Still, he had to act in a diplomatic manner if he wanted his future subjects to remain in their new home.

A pillar of water shot up from the forest, a hundred feet from Dallion. Water drops burst from it, flying straight at Dallion like daggers.

Instinctively, Dallion split into instances and summoned his aura sword. Dozens of spell circles of his own emerged, surrounding him in several layers of aether spheres.

The water drops smashed into them like hail. The vast part splattered into water, but the overall force was able to shatter the magic barriers one after the other.

Retaining a calm state of mind, Dallion summoned one of his clay cylinders and broke it. The object fragmented with a purple flash, releasing the spell imprinted inside. A moment later, an aether copy of Dallion emerged, casting a new set of aether barriers, this time around the water pillar itself.

Taking the opportunity, Dallion performed a line attack through the column of water, slicing it in half.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

A purple rectangle flashed before his eyes. A shrieking scream followed as half of the water fell back to the forest. The rest quickly changed form, turning into what looked like a winged shark.

What the heck is that? Dallion asked, covering himself with two sets of aether armor.

According to his aether vision, the water entity contained several intricate clusters of magic threads, making it seem closer to constructs rather than living creatures.

A water golem? Dallion thought.

It wasn't by any means impossible, come to think about it, except that he hadn't seen any so far. Thinking back, he couldn't remember any mention of any, either.

The creature slammed against the barriers surrounding it, shattering them with ease.

The aether echo flew right at the golem, burying its hands within the watery surface. Extending what magic threads it had, the echo went straight for one of the creature's thread clusters. That, if nothing else, would severely weaken the golem, if not kill it outright.

Water spikes emerged from the watery surface moments before the echo could achieve its goal. There was no warning—no magic symbols or change in the golem's threads. It was as if the water had changed on its own accord, as if it belonged to a copyette.

Concentrating, Dallion focused his aether vision on a spot of his enemy. Threads, fractions of the size of a human hair were everywhere, going through the water like a barely invisible mesh. This was no accident. Whoever had created the magic method of water golem creation had gone through a lot of trouble to come up with something so intricate, yet reliable.

The aether echo burst in a flash of purple light, though not before drawing in part of the golem's internal threads. More water poured down onto the forest as the entity shed another layer of itself.

No shortcuts, Dallion threw his aura sword right at the golem's head. A split second later, he had summoned his harpsisword and played several chords, infusing them with spark.

The sword was avoided, but the sound threads easily burned through the mesh within the water, attaching themselves to the magic thread clusters.

Got you, Dallion said, playing another chord.

Magic ran along them, overwhelming the golem with an internal attack. Threads tore and snapped, their magic discharging with purple sparks.

The creature shrieked as patches of water detached from it like chunks of jelly. Its struggle only expedited the process.

Barely a tenth of its initial size, the golem attempted to charge at Dallion in one final attack. Whatever water drops it still had control of darted onward, aiming to deal at least some damage. Significantly weaker than before, they splattered over Dallion's aether armor without result. The mass of the body quickly followed. For a moment it seemed that it might reach its target, but just as



it was about to, Dallion performed a multi slash attack, causing it to freeze in midair. The aether mesh that maintained its stability hardened, then shattered. Incapable of remaining in the air, the water poured straight down.

Not bad, dear boy, Adzorg said.

Dallion didnt accept the praise. Although he had stopped the golem, he had done so after it had destroyed his aether echo. That wasnt supposed to happen. The situation should never have needed him to use an echo, let alone lose it.

Water can hide anywhere, Harp said from his domain. Dont get caught by surprise again.

Do you think it was hunting me? Dallion asked. Or did it just happen to be here?

*Theres no point in a sentinel to be sent this far east. It was hunting someone, but I cant be sure if that someone was you.*

Dallion felt lumps of ice in his stomach. This felt like something Grym would do. If true, it meant the noble was alive and in good standing, and still set on killing Dallion.

I didnt think hed be so obsessed. Harp, can you teach me how to cast golems?

No, the nymph replied

You dont want to or you cant?

*I cant. Thats mage territory.*

It was obvious that she wasnt telling him everything. Dallion could feel the same fear she had emanated when her race had returned from its banishment. It was less intense this time, pushed deep down in her attempt to keep it hidden, but still there.

I didnt show anything new, Dallion said. Theyve seen me use the skills and the backups.

*They havent seen you in action. Now they have.*

There was no denying that. Enemy nobles were like guardians they never forgot and adapted their approach to improve their performance next time.

Tell me how to remain hidden from them.

The nymph didnt respond.

Harp.

Cast an illusion of yourself to turn into something without water, she said at last. If youre good enough, theres a chance they wont notice the magic. Golems focus on water.

Water, but not magic?

*Everyone made the same mistake. They cast an illusion to make themselves into something else, but it was always something with water. When they get a scent of the water, they look closer to see if theres anything odd about it.*

It attacked me because I was a mage, Dallion said. That worked a bit in his favor, although he had to be quick about it. There was every chance that the place he wanted to go to had already been marked as a threat and destroyed.

#### Chapter 853: Two Settlements, Three Domains

The poison plague and the war had changed everything in the world. Nobles had died off, replaced by others, cities had shifted allegiances, most countries had melted away, either destroyed or merged with one of the three world powers. Yet, a few spots in the world had gone through a lot less. Canopa village couldnt be said to me of one of those places, but its changes had a more recent cause.

Massive rips covered the veil of illusion that kept the village from being seen. Dallion could also see the state of the magic threads surrounding the area. To the untrained eye, everything seemed in order: the trees were there very much unharmed and brimming with life. There was a different truth beneath in many spots the magic threads had thickened, suggesting that numerous healing spells had been cast to create the impression that no fighting had taken place.

Guess Im not the only one. Dallion floated through the villages protective veil. The illusion around him vanished, transforming him from a floating rock into his human form.

Intruder! someone shouted.

The few people in the open rushed into the nearby buildings, which in turn were soon covered in three-layer magic barriers. Several spell circles followed offensive magic, from what Dallion could tell, based on the magic symbols involved. Before any of them could trigger, a new spell took effect, shattering them in an instant. It was definitely a power move, though it didnt come from Dallion.

Continuing to the ground, as if nothing had happened, Dallion looked around. There were a lot more people than last time, though he still felt the presence of the hundreds of dryad items within. That seemed to be the only thing to have grown since his last visit.

Im Count Dallion Elazni, he said in a loud voice. Fear and suspicion emanated from everywhere, covering the entire city in a fog of negative emotions. And a former battlemage. Wheres Scribe Lelandra?

No answer. That was a bad sign. The woman was one of the people whod be able to confirm his identity.

What about mage Eleria Fall? he asked louder.

You honor us with your visit, your lordship, a familiar voice said as the old woman emerged a few steps away from him. Dallion hadnt noticed the exact spell shed used a testament to her skills. He could tell at a single glance, though, that she was close to exhausted. I would have arranged for a better welcome if Id known youd arrive.

There was a time when the womans attitude would have made Dallion tense. Now, he simply found it amusing. A web of intricate illusion spells surrounded Eleria, but it was unlike any he had seen

before. Beneath the surface of the old woman hid an even older woman, yet beneath that was someone who didnt belong in this world.

Shes shimmering, Dallion thought.

That meant she came from another world, and as far as he was aware, there was only one group of otherworlders in the Academy.

No need, he said. Its not like were strangers. Dallion glanced around. The village looks a bit deserted.

The wars took their toll, the mage sighed. Anyone capable was called to the Academy immediately after the change of archmage. Most of the rest were moved after the emperors victory in the west. What you see is the small group of assistants I managed to claw away from Alien.

Hardly an easy feat. Even if she were part of the circle, which now could be called a trio, that would hardly have put her in Aliens good books.

Please, Eleria gestured for Dallion to enter the main building. Even with everything else in ruin, it remained just as impressive as it had during his previous visits: a piece of Earth-like civilization in the wilderness; well, not entirely Earth-like.

The woman cast a quick spell, transporting them into her office. Now that Dallion could see past illusions, it looked a lot less impressive. Like everything at the Academy, it was a small, charmless room covered with illusions.

Why maintain the illusion? Dallion asked. I know you can see through it. He looked at the simple wooden chair wrapped in luxury.

Appearances, the woman said, sitting behind her desk. Also, with enough practice, you can almost fool yourself into believing its actually true. A beggars hologram.

A beggars hologram. Dallion cracked a smile. I must remember that one. Its rather good. So, youre the final one? The lady of clouds.

It sounds rather poetic. The woman let out a dry chuckle. There was a time when Id have loved to hear that.

Back when you betrayed Adzorg?

Ive done many things, a lot of them questionable. That wasnt one of them, though. The old mans disgrace was ordered from the very top. Dont get me wrong, Id have loved to prove myself better than him, maybe even take his place, but the decision was made and we could only obey. She paused for a few moments. Youve seen him, right?

Adzorg? Hes alright, considering.

Not Adzorg. The emperor.

Dallion arched a brow.

The first time I saw him, I knew that there was no standing against that.

Youre scared of him?

The real question is why isn't everyone else? They live in his city, laugh at his jokes, stab each other in the back in order to get closer. Instead, they should be running as far away as they could. I did the moment I had a chance.

That was why she had communicated through clouds all this time. It wasn't because she wanted to flaunt her superior spellcraft skills or maybe there was that as well but because she wanted to remain far from the emperor's reach.

Was that why you created your enclave?

Part of the reason. And even that backfired. Another monster has appeared, and she's all too eager to eliminate all mages other than her own, including this sorry place.

Yeah, I saw. Water golems?

The same. They pretended to be underground streams. By the time I noticed, they'd already found our location.

You kept them away, it seems.

For the moment. That's the thing about water; it takes a lot more effort to stop it from getting somewhere. The mage leaned back. So, why are you here, your lordship? She added a mocking note to his title. Searching for more bestiary volumes?

The emperor has allowed me to create a settlement, Dallion said. It's close to the empire's eastern border. Actually, it is the new border. A bit north and further east, just outside the forest.

He allowed you to do that? He must really like you or see you as insignificant.

I'm also allowed to invite anyone I choose, as long as it isn't from the capital.

And you decided to come here? The woman laughed. You think since we're used to the eastern wilderness, we'll help strengthen your settlement?

Looks like you need protection.

Strictly speaking, Dallion wasn't at all charmed that she was of the Shimmering Circle. Even if she had helped him on a few occasions, anything that had to do with Alien was a big no-no in his book. There was no telling how long he could trust her. She had already betrayed her mentor; how long would it be until she betrayed her new protector as well?

A few months ago, things would have been different. There are less than fifty remaining, all of them mages.

I can work with that.

You don't get it. Mages have been trickling back to the Academy for months. If the golems hadn't appeared, we'd have left this place entirely.

I thought you didn't want to be anywhere near the emperor.

The Academy is far enough. Besides, better close to the monster that you know than the alternative.

When she put it that way, Dallion had to agree. The nymph empress had shown that she had the power and the will to kill anyone who didn't submit. And while there hadn't been any water displays

since her declaration of war, she clearly was doing a good job infiltrating the empire with golems. If her reach extended all the way here, why hadn't she taken on the emperor? More importantly, why hadn't he done anything about it?

I can provide protection, Dallion offered.

You really believe that, don't you?

The mage concentrated her focus on him. Minuscule threads left her body, moving forward. Adzorg had made Dallion read enough combat spell books to know what that was. Eleria was trying to see his skills, possibly more. Naturally, he had no intention of letting her.

His fingers moved with the speed of lightning, summoning the thread cutter dagger. One moment he was holding it, infusing it with spark, the next he sliced the space between him and the mage, severing the magic threads. Immediately, the woman pulled her threads back.

And you believe I can't. Dallion unsummoned his weapon. Let's agree to disagree.

You're good. Better than Alien, better than me, maybe better than the old man, but you're no match for the emperor.

She was right, of course. Dallion had a ways to go before he was up for the challenge. That's why he had made an alliance with the Order, though.

I'm still taking the village, he said. You can leave once we get there.

You're offering me safe passage?

For a price.

That's it? No bargaining? No pleading?

I don't need to. Dallion smiled. He was the superior one now. You helped me, so I thought I'd be nice. I can easily take the village and leave you here, if that's what you prefer.

The silence told him she didn't.

Alright. Gather everyone in this building. We start in half an hour.

I'll take care of it. There was a hint of concern in her voice, though the mage was doing a good job hiding her feelings from emanating. Do I get to keep anything?

Choose some of your books and magic trinkets. Just don't be too greedy.

While the mages were getting settled, Dallion went outside again to check on the state of the guardians. From what he could tell, most of them had seen better days, but thankfully were not beyond repair. It was almost sad how many weapons and items the inhabitants had left behind. Focused on their survival, they had probably only taken only what was of greatest importance: money and a set of clothes. They knew they couldn't win in a battle against the nymphs, so they didn't plan on fighting. The village was the only bastion of protection that kept them safe, and it was a matter of time before it failed.

Did you know she was your apprentice? Dallion asked.

Not in the least, Adzorg replied. She had hidden herself quite well. Of course, due to my limitations, that wasnt particularly difficult. Id have liked to have a chat with her.

Thats not in the cards.

*I guess not. The*

former archmage sighed.

Ten minutes proved enough for all the mages to become ready and willing. Wanting to get out of this place for months, they gladly put themselves in Dallions hands. On his part, he was all too happy to oblige.

## **AREA AWAKENING**

Reality shifted.

**You are in the land of CANOPA**

**Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny**

The state of things was a lot worse than Dallion thought. Two more attacks and the realm would lose its integrity, in turn causing the end of the realm and the village itself.

Town. Dallion corrected himself mentally. Last time he was here, he had improved the place to a town.

Guardian, Dallion said expectantly.

A blob of darkness formed on the ground twenty feet away, then shattered as the form of a rune golem emerged. Aware that it didnt present a challenge, the entity fell down to one knee, bowing in front of Dallion.

No need for that. Dallion went up to it. His hand tapped the side of the guardians head. Ill need you to give me control of the realm, though.

The guardian looked up, then nodded.

**The GUARDIAN OF CANOPA has submitted to your power.**

**You are the owner of the land of CANOPA.**

The sensation felt good, although it wasnt enough to boost Dallions level, at least not yet.

Vih, can I integrate domains? he asked, moving away from the golem.

Sure, the dryad replied. Ive no idea how, though.

Always full of useful advice.

*Ouch. Its not like it matters, though. Youd probably ignore it, anyway.*

Dallion probably would have. Combining his two domains would have been a nice touch, but the truth was that he didnt need Canopa for the buildingshe could make a lot better ones himself. It was inhabitants he lacked.

Better hold on, he said, his voice echoing in the real world.

The outermost layer of the realm turned purple, surrounding Canopa like a giant bubble. Moments later, the bubble slid through the sea of reality, making its way through the forest like a marble through sand.

#### Chapter 854: Orders of the Twelve Suns

It was arguable whether moving the settlement was faster than flying, but it turned out preferable. As Dallion directed his bubble of reality through the wilderness and the thin layer of control that stemmed from the imperial capital he sensed several new water golems laying in wait. Smaller than the one he'd faced, they acted like underground streams, only a small part of them peeking over the surface.

The war clearly wasn't going as well as the imperial house claimed, or the nymphs' influence wouldn't reach so far in. Based on the map, they had effectively cut the country in two, though at the same time, they didn't have the strength to split it outright.

There was one more thing that Dallion felt in the process: his first real experience of worldwide domains. Being in charge of a single settlement was no different than a pebble in a lake. The entire focus of the domain ruler could only be on the size and state of the domain they held. Everything beyond its borders was irrelevant unless it made an attempt to invade. Controlling three spread-out settlements had opened his senses to an entirely new sensation. Dallion could feel almost see the emperor's domain, as if he were playing a strategy game. One vast blob of power covered everything from the imperial capital to the edge of the forest Dallion was now traversing. In the areas of the wilderness, the power was thin—no thicker than a sheet of paper—but it still remained linked to its owner. Dallion's own domains were like three dots within this vastness: his mansion in the capital, the village-town of Canopa, and the newly created village of Sandstorm. His power wasn't enough to form a control area between the three, so they remained small, but by no means alone. The Order of the Seven Moons also left their presence known, spread throughout the area, like beads in a field. More specifically, they were like the points of a grid, positioned on all other domains and even the unclaimed wilderness.

It took over a day to approach Sandstorm. A fair distance away, Dallion brought Canopa out of the wilderness and made the inhabitants one final offer to join his domains. Just as before, all of them refused.

Not the best start, dear boy, Adzorg said with a note of criticism. You could have used your music skills to convince them.

First attempts are like that, Dallion replied, watching the mages fly off in the direction of the imperial capital, or maybe it was the Academy? From this distance, it was difficult to determine. Besides, why would I need people that could be turned against me at any point?

Because of the numbers, the old mage replied. The sad truth of the matter is that quantity beats quality almost every time.

I doubt the emperor feels the same, Dallion said beneath his breath. Privately, he had hoped that at least Eleria would change her mind and stay. It was impossible not to notice the amount of fear she had of the emperor. Sadly, despite that, she had flown off in the end.

At least I got the settlement itself, he thought.

That, too, didnt seem to be a huge benefit. With the people gone, Dallion considered merging the settlements into one, but quickly decided against it. Without its inhabitants, the former Academy enclave wasnt a town. It wasnt even a village. Given enough time and effort, Dallion could keep the buildings from crumbling for a few years, possibly decades, but that was a temporary measure.

## **AREA AWAKENING**

**You are in the land of CANOPA**

**Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny**

Using his domain ruler powers, Dallion pulled out the domain of each individual building from the general settlement. Most of them he didnt find useful, but the main building was perfect for a library. He could always build homes to match the inhabitants, whoever they turned out to be. It was the fields that he needed, though. If nothing else, the mages had taken great care of their food supply something that a few weeks of neglect was incapable of ruining.

You give picky people a bad name, Vihrogon laughed. This is definitely a first.

No one ever did a spring cleaning? Dallion asked.

*Not like you. Its a lot easier to fix up a shell of a settlement than build it from scratch. Anyone can build shells. The way youre going*

**The land of CANOPA has lost too many elements.**

**The land of CANOPA has been reduced to a Level 4 village.**

A blue rectangle popped up.

That will happen. The dryad guardian finished his sentence.

Oops? Dallion said mockingly, as he continued to remove areas from his domain and add them to his other one.

**FIELD has been added to the land of Sandstorm.**

**FIELD has been added to the land of Sandstorm.**

Rectangles kept on stacking up. Dallion ignored them. Then, when he had moved everything he needed, he returned to the real world and pulled out the domain guardians of everything hed not chosen.

The vast majority were creature guardians he released into the wilderness. After the time theyd spent protecting their respective structures, they deserved to have a life of their own. The rune golem that had protected the whole of Canopa, though, received a different treatment.

What do you prefer? Dallion looked up at the bulking entity. It wasnt as big as it was in the awakened realms, though still impressive, rising fifteen feet above Dallion. I can release you into the wilderness, or you can become part of my new settlement and help out with some farm chores.

The guardian kept looking at him, not saying a word.



You wont be a guardian, Dallion added. Not exactly. Either way, youll stay in the real world.

For ten seconds, the guardian didnt move. Dallion could feel its confusion at not being a town guardian anymore. Sensations of loss mixed with eagerness for adventure. Dallion had felt something similar back on Earth as a child. At the time, his parents had finally bought him a new superhero blouse hed been asking for. Putting it on, though, would mean hed have to wear his current favorite blouse less. There had been a moment of sadness and indecision, but ultimately, Dallion had made the switch. The rune golem did the same, stepping out of Canopas confines.

The moment the creatures foot crossed the barrier, all remaining structures crumbled into rubble.

Thats what happens when theres nothing left to keep the cracklings at bay, Adzorg said. Fascinating process. Ive never observed it on such a scale.

Dust filled the air as what little remains there were settled down.

*Are you sure that was the right decision, dear boy? Every noble would have fought tooth and nail to keep hold of a domain.*

I know. Dallion nodded. I needed what was in Canopa, not the village itself.

*You know best. Or at least one can hope*

Vih, can the method be used in combat to destroy someone elses domain?

Why would it? The dryad asked, confused. Its more difficult than invading a realm. If you want to capture it, just capture it. If youre strong enough for that, why diminish your future gains?

I guess thats one way of looking at things. Lets see how Di is doing.

The ruckus had caught the attention of several creatures, especially Gleam. Utterly bored with her current environment, she quickly fluttered to see what had happened. Finding nothing interesting or impressive in the degree of destruction, the familiar then fluttered back to Sandstorm. Dallion followed soon after.

Arriving at the outer wall, Dallion noticed one major difference: a massive gate was blocking the path, a gate made of ice.

Like it? Diroh asked as she flew over the wall. I thought Id decorate a bit.

Unmelting ice, Dallion said, recognizing the magic symbols on the gates surface. Nice touch, but we cant use it.

Why? The fury crossed her arms with a note of defiance.

I came across a water golem near the village. The nymphs are sending spies to this side of the empire. Having the gate made of something they could manipulate isnt the best idea.

What about the river? Diroh didnt back off. Thats made of water. If they get here, we're done either way.

There was some logic to that. Dallion was going to have to add some defensive spells to the river, just in case.

Good point, he relented. Ill take care of that. Will you be able to look after the place for a bit longer?

Let me guess, she sighed. Youre going somewhere again.

I need to get Adzorg. Dallion offered a smile. Ill try not to be long. After millennia in other realms, Im still using the excuses my father did. If the nymphs attack, dont try to protect the place, just leave. Alright?

Wow. Thanks for the vote of confidence.

Im not joking around. Dallions tone hardened. Theyre too strong for you to take on. Im not sure I could.

The last comment made the fury pause. While it was obvious that Dallion hadnt reached the pinnacle, there werent that many people in the worldin and out of the empirethat would easily defeat him in a fight. Emperor Tamin was an obvious example, as was the nymph empress. It remained unclear how the archdukes would fare, but it was safe to say that Dallion himself wasnt urging to find out. For him to openly admit he might not protect his domain so far east, there had to be a very serious reason.

I wont put myself at risk, Diroh said. Dallion could feel she was lying, just as he could sense the effort she had put in to hide it.

Be back in a bit.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

In the real world, Dallion disappeared, as if sinking into the ground. What he had done was merely venture into his awakening realm, then use the link between it and his domain in the capital to get there. For any onlooker, it had taken a second. Surprisingly, for Dallion, it had only taken him a few moments longer.

Using standard awakening abilities, he focused on the link. A doorway emerged from the ground in his personal realm, connecting him to his domain. The moment he stepped through, he was out of his magnificent island realm and in a dump.

Plates, bottles, and silverware covered the floor, scattered among clothes and sleeping people. The smell of alcohol and tobacco was so strong that it almost knocked Dallion off his feet.

Dal? One among the pile of sleepers stirred. The person was in no better state than anyone else present, but a combination of guilt, shame, and regret were enough to bring him to a communicative state. I was just about to clean up. The man jumped to his feet. I thought youd be back a bit later.

Its fine, Ber. Dallion suppressed his initial reaction. Go back to sleep.

Seriously, man. I feel really bad about this. Its not as bad as it looks.

Go back to sleep. Dallion used his music and magic skills, instantly knocking them out.

Where the heck is Taem? He looked about.

The servant was usually the first to greet Dallion upon his return, although this was the first time Dallion had used this method to transport himself.

Vih, why dont nobles use this to move from place to place? he asked.

Who says they dont? The dryad guardian let out a chuckle. For the most part, it doesnt save time and has more downsides than advantages. For one thing, it only works between places that are already yours, and that has a tendency of changing fast during wars.

Of course. Domain holders had the tendency to keep on fighting between domains. Given that true time didnt stop, one might well end up losing a domain before they reached it. That would end up quite embarrassing, not to mention dangerous for the affected awakened.

Casting a quick spell, Dallion floated his way to the second floor. Ber had faithfully followed the instructions, not letting anyone set foot there. Just in case, Dallion decided to make sure.

Has anyone passed through?

No. Both guardians replied almost in unison.

So far, so good.

Anything unusual happen?

This time, the answer wasnt immediate.

Scrolls are piling up in your study, the building guardian said.

What else is new? Dallion sighed, then made his way to the room.

The scrolls were, as he expected, messages from Euryale. Naturally, they were written using syllablights, ensuring that no one, even the emperor, would be able to read the words. If anyone were to look at the symbols on the page, they would see unintelligible gibberish. The moment they felt Dallions presence, though, the creatures within the realm of the scroll moved about, forming actual letters.

Reading through the brief messages, Dallion could easily tell that Eury missed him. At the same time, the war wasnt going well. The Alliance had withstood several major clashes, and even taken out a few more cities on the oceans coast, yet that was only against the Azures human forces. Several cities had been swallowed by the sea and all attempts to take out nymph cities had ended in utter failure. The Alliance had already pulled back inland, abandoning any and all cities within fifty miles from the coast.

Just as Dallion was about to take another scroll, a sealed envelope materialized in front of him, dropping to the floor. It was very different from the scrolls. The paper had a slightly yellowy hue, not to mention that the seal was made of molten gold.

Any of you know what this means? Dallion asked, looking at the symbol on the seal: twelve round dots connected to each other, forming a twelve-point star.

Since no one said a word, Dallion broke the seal and opened the envelope.

***You have passed the selection.***

## ***Order of the Twelve Suns.***

### Chapter 855: The Zodiac Building

Twelve suns, Dallion said, looking closely at the letter.

He had taken a moment to explore the items realm, but found it to be completely empty. There was no guardian, no creatures, and no hints; just a plain square room that had its destiny fulfilled. The seal was no different, other than it probably had enough material to create two gold coins.

The only time hed heard anything of the sort mentioned was in Hannahs memory. It was nothing more than a passing mention, but had come from the emperor.

Anything you cant tell me, Nil? Dallion asked. He knew referring to Adzorg in his echo name annoyed the old man.

*Yes, dear boy, Im aware of what it means, and no, I prefer not to tell you.*

That settled things.

Is it linked to the skills? Dallion put the letter away. The coincidence was too great for him not to notice.

I honestly cannot tell you, dear boy, Adzorg insisted. Not that it matters. Youve passed the selection, so youll find out by yourself.

It would have been nice if they had given a few details. How to find them, for instance.

Just as Dallion said that, there was a knock on the door. Normally, Dallion would barely have paid any attention, but the timing made him slightly uneasy. It didnt help that he hadnt heard the sound of anyone approaching outside.

Whos there? He asked the building guardian.

Taem, came the response.

Young master. A second knock followed. My apologies, but might I have a word?

Sure. Dallion cast a quick spell, moving his correspondence into the realm of the desk, then turned around facing the door.

The butler appeared exactly as he had ever been, from the clothes that he wore to the ever-present look of concern. Even so, there was no telling whether that was a copyette or the real person. Thinking about it, there was no telling whether there had been a real person to begin with.

My apologies for the state of your home, Taem said with a slight bow. Your cousin had a rather lively gathering last night.

I imagine.

I shall put everything in order at once.

No, no need. I was just passing by. Dallion moved away from the desk. I need to see the emperor.

Wonderful, sir. I take it that things in your new domain are going well?

Perfect. Dallion lied. That's what I'm here to report.

As you well should, sir. Unfortunately, I fear that it might be difficult to arrange for an audience with the emperor. The duchess informs me that he has been rather busy with meetings today.

Should have known great-grandma would keep an eye on me, Dallion thought.

I'm sure he'll summon me when he has a moment. It wasn't like the emperor didn't know he'd arrived.

Absolutely, sir. Until then, might I recommend a pleasant stroll throughout the city? The butler took a step forward. Carefully, he took out a small golden rectangle from his pocket and handed it to Dallion.

The item had the approximate dimensions of an Earth business card, only made of solid gold. Taking it, Dallion noticed a pattern on the smooth surface. It was so faint that only an awakened with a perception trait of over sixty would have spotted it. The pattern was identical to the Twelve Suns seal he had received moments ago. Additionally, there was a map representation of the imperial capital with a large dot in a specific neighborhood.

The duchess is extremely proud of your achievement, young master. Taem said, himself emanating the emotion. As am I.

Before Dallion could say a word, the servant bowed again and left the room.

Subtle, Dallion thought. If Duchess Elazni was involved, the Order of the Twelve Suns had to be a sort of high noble club or secret society. Getting involved with them was the last thing he wanted, but rejecting them outright was going to cause issues. No doubt the pettiest of the petty had gathered there, and while admission was difficult, ignoring an invitation could very well be viewed as hostile.

Alright. Dallion put the gold card away. Let's pay this new Order a visit.

Finding the Order of the Twelve Suns proved more difficult than Dallion initially expected. The map on the card had helped considerably, but finding a grand and impressive building among all the other grand and impressive buildings involved a bit of trial and error. The neighborhood in question was one of the places where the imperial guilds kept their headquarters. All of them were massive, impressively built, with the arrogance of generations of architects flowing through them. Each of them claimed to be the best the empire had to offer, and each was eager to have Dallion join their ranks.

Hey, Dallion greeted a very well-dressed porter, as he had done three times before. Do you accept new members?

The porter gave him a weird look. A blocker ring prevented any other information from being gleaned. Unlike most of the guilds within the empire, here they knew exactly how valuable information was.

The porter undoubtedly knew who Dallion was. Everyone in the city did. And still, etiquette demanded that he pretended as if he didn't.

After several seconds enough for the pause to be noticed the man extended his hand. That was new.

Your card, sir.

Of course. Internally, Dallion smiled. He had finally found the right place. Here. he handed the golden card.

Thank you for your punctuality, Count Elazni, the porter said with a slight nod. We are grateful for accepting the invitation. Welcome to Zodiac. He opened the buildings door and moved to the side.

Zodiac, Dallion thought. The word wasnt supposed to exist in this world.

The entrance hall was a lot smaller than one would expect for a building that size. In fact, it was little more than a slightly larger corridor leading to an even more impressive door. Light crystals covered the walls, filling the room with a soft yellow light. The moment the entrance door closed, they all lit up in a bright white.

A spell circle appeared, forming a teleport spell. The symbols were easy to recognize, but even so, one had to admire the precision of the execution. A moment later, there was a flash. Dallion expected a mage to emerge, but to his surprise a noble was standing there, and not just any noble.

Hi, the woman said with a pursed smile. She was five foot four, wearing an elegant pair of black trousers made of onyx thread, along with a long-sleeved shirt and an emerald vest. Golden-buckled dragonhide shoes completed the outfit, containing more enchantments than most items Dallion had seen. Im Unnie, she introduced herself.

Just Unnie? Dallion asked. He could see her awakening level and it was three levels higher than his.

Standard ranks dont mean anything here. Stepping through those doors is enough to prove you have the potential of being special. The question is whether youd like to continue.

The direct approach was rather refreshingit saved Dallion a lot of time. However, there were too many details that seemed out of place.

This isnt a guild, is it? he asked.

You could call it that. In a manner of speaking, even the Order of the Seven Moons is a guild. People who join follow certain rules, have their own internal ranks and laws, and are ruled over by one omnipotent guild master.

Interesting comparison. Dallion took a step closer. Despite his attempts, he remained unable to see anything other than the womans awakening level. All traits and skills remained hidden. Youre a noble mage.

Back at the Academy, he had heard of such instances, but never had actually met them in person. Part of him even believed that noble was used as a family status.

As are you. The woman looked him in the eye. In part, thats why I was selected to be your initiation guide.

How many of us are there?

We welcome anyone and everyone with the appropriate skills. I thought youd have figured it out by now.

Zodiac, Dallion said. Order of the Twelve Suns, but they arent suns. They are constellations.

What is a constellation, but a collection of suns?

There was no way a person of this world would know that. Why wasn't there any shimmering light surrounding her?

You're an otherworlder? Dallion moved a step closer.

No, but the person who created the Order was.

Magic circles appeared on all the walls, instantly covering them in paintings from top to bottom. At first glance, there was nothing unusual about them: groups of nobles hunting, drinking, eating, having fun, even playing sophisticated card games. Looking closely, certain elements popped out: twentieth century sneakers, a person wearing a wristwatch or a heavy metal t-shirt.

Dallion's immediate reaction was to summon his aura blade. Magic circles flash around him, covering him with several layers of aether armor and protective barriers. At the same time, the woman did nothing.

Now you understand why we can't be open about it. Unnie looked at one of the portraits. Emperor Tamin the first, she pointed. A few decades after he'd established his exceedingly small kingdom. There was nothing special about it at the time. There had been dozens of kingdoms established by otherworlders.

So, the emperor was an otherworlder. Dallion didn't put his guard down.

Many were even larger than his. A fair amount had a lot more people and awakened. The difference was that, unlike them, Emperor Tamin didn't put faith in providence, but skills. If someone could do well, what did it matter where they came from?

An order based on abilities Dallion mused.

Not lineage, not traits, but skills. That was the ideal that made the Tamin Empire survive while the rest didn't.

In his mind, Dallion was going through possible combat outcomes. He had to assume that the woman was at least his equal, otherwise why would she have been chosen? At present, she had the upper hand. There wasn't enough space for ranged and melee combat, leaving magic and domain ruler skills. Given that she was a member of the Order of Twelve Suns, it was safe to assume that her control of the domain would be better.

Going through the odds, Dallion lowered his weapon.

Things seem to have changed a bit since then. The barriers and aether armor faded away.

A price of efficiency. The principle helped the kingdom become the empire, but by then there were too many people involved. Unnie continued. And most of them wanted to make an exception for their families. The emperor's son noticed that as well, so he created our Order. We don't bow down to the Moons, we don't follow the Star, we rely on our own strength and that of our skills.

That was such a human thing to do. The first emperor must have seen how the Order of the Seven Moons was structured and copied it all the way down to the name. Seeing as it hadn't caught on, it must have slowly turned into a secret society for the skilled. According to Adzorg, it was next to

impossible for an awakened to have all the skills. The most a typical awakened got were four or five. Even with skill gems, it was next to impossible to reach ten, as for going beyond

Is the emperor a member? Dallion moved to examine another of the portraits a massive man in full armor and a set of headphones.

All emperors are members. Anyone who sits on the throne is required to have all skills possibly obtainable.

The explanation didn't pass unnoticed it was a very lawyerly way of saying that not all members had twelve skills.

I can tell you a lot more, but for that, you need to pass your trial.

I thought I already had. Dallion pretended to be surprised. The letter, the invitation

Said that you had been selected. Your potential has been acknowledged and has led you to the entrance. The trial will see if you have what it takes to pass.

Dallion nodded.

*Any advice you can give me, Adzorg?*

The former archmage remained silent.

Our temple is divided into several halls. Unnie went up to the door leading further in. Past here, you'll reach the common room. To get there, you must show the door that you have mastered your common skills adequately.

An awakened fight? Seems a bit cliché.

The woman laughed.

Of the twelve skill groups, attack, guard, athletics and acrobatics were regarded as the common ones. If Dallion needed to use only those, the trial had to be related to combat.

What if I use some of my other skills? He joined the woman in front of the door.

We'll know and you'll fail.

Clear and simple, Dallion thought.

Taking a deep breath, he put his hand on the door's surface.

## **ITEM AWAKENING**

Chapter 856: Four Guardian Item

**You are in the land of DOOR.**

**Defeat the guardians and change the land's destiny.**

Guardians? From what Dallion knew, a normal item could only have one guardian. This wasn't a sphere item by any means, and yet there could be no mistake rectangles never lied.

The reality that had formed around Dallion was an endless land of ruined buildings, only all the buildings were completely made of wood. They continued to the horizon forming massive castles as large as cliffs, pits as chasms and forests made of plants and beams.



Very sneaky, Dallion thought.

In order to pass the Order of the Suns trial, every new member had to defeat the guardians. However, that guaranteed that the trial would become more and more difficult for each following member. It was a very skill based approach to expect, ensuring that every new member was better than the last.

Sense anything, Vih? Dallion asked combat splitting to look around.

Not every wood domain has a dryad guardian, the armadil shield guardian said. But yeah, there are a few of them.

Stronger than you?

Definitely not, the guardian laughed. Though you couldnt take me on without magic and music.

That was a good point. Not using his full set of abilities was going to be a bigger challenge than the fight itself.

Just combat skills, Dallion said to himself.

Am I limited in terms of weapons? has asked loudly. Id hate to fail because of a technicality.

Weapons are fine. A dryad emerged on top of a nearby wooden tower. He was tall with broad shoulders and surprisingly old. Leaves of wood covered his entire body like scales, leaving only his face visible. As long as theres no magic in them.

Dallion looked at the pair of wooden sickles on either side of the dryads waist. Considering his options, he summoned the Nox dagger and the thread splitter.

These okay?

They have a bit of magic. Another dryad appeared, this one was female with long hair falling down her back and shoulders. There wasnt a single piece of armor covering her body, but hundreds and hundreds of vines. But not enough to matter.

Whoever made this trial was very straightforward. Dallion smiled. Hes guard, youre attack. That means there are two remaining.

Two more dryads appeared a hundred feet away. Both were male: one bulky and muscular, another tall and athletic. They, too, had a pair of wooden sickles each, but confirmed Dallions suspicions to be correct.

Just as Dallion was about to ask when the trial would start, each of the dryads burst into instances.

Dallion immediately followed. Normally, two hundred instances would seem quite a lot. When facing a total of four hundred, though, there was a bit left to be desired.

The attack dryad charged first, the vines on her body shooting out in Dallions direction like spears.

Vih Dallion summoned his armadil shield. Extend.

The metal shield emerged in front of him, growing to form a semi sphere blocking the torrent of vines. Dozens of strikes resounded as the vines twisted around the edges, aiming to strike at Dallion from behind.

## **MINOR STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 10%**

Red rectangles filled the air as Dallion sliced off the vines using a three-sixty line strike. The affected dryad yelled out in pain, pulling back. The remaining three also changed the pattern of their attack. The guard dryad rushed in front of the attack one, while the athletics dryad broke off half a wooden building and threw it at Dallion.

Theyre nothing much, the armadil shield said. Just dont get hit and youll be fine.

Dallion couldnt help but smile. Hundreds of instances were moving about attacking and defending in a variety of ways. In several of those instances, Dallion himself was wounded, though for the most part most of the damage never came to be.

The dryads had also picked up on his attack pattern. The instances in which they received damage also didnt come to pass. Dallion could well have used his force splitting to ensure another wound or two, but that would have been pointless. All of his strikes were minor, and for whatever reason he couldnt see any white rectangles associated with the door guardians. Whoever had created the realm had also used magic to shield them. It would likely be possible to see through the spell and get to the information, but that would require magic which would in turn fail the trial. If he wanted to pass through this, he would have to do it the old-fashioned way.

Line attack! Dallion thought, slashing through the air several times in immediate succession.

Mountains were split in two, their upper halves crumbling before his very eyes, but even that wasnt enough to hit the guardians. Not to mention that the wooden leaves covering the guard dryad were capable of withstanding the blow.

Get back to the basics, dear boy, Adzorg said.

What do you think Im doing? Dallion replied.

The intensity of the fight was too much for awakening markers to handle. He had made many attempts to complete a skill sequence, but the dryad guardians had prevented him from doing so at every turn. In fact, it was a far greater challenge for him to prevent them from achieving one.

Its like fighting ants, Dallion thought, landing a point attack right in the guard dryads chest.

## **MINOR STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 10%**

*Some very persistent ants.*

In the past, a single strike from the Nox dagger was enough to destroy the weapons and armor of most opponents. In this case, everything destroyed tended to regrow back within moments.

These are definitely a lot tougher than the guardians of the aura swords, Dallion grumbled.

Of course they are, Vihrogon laughed. They are domain rulers.

How do you get four domain rulers in the same item?

*The same way you do anyone else. You just let them in.*

Very funny.

Dallion continued analyzing the fight in his mind. No matter what approach he took, things were always the same. Attack and athletics would attempt to attack him from close and distant range. Guard would do everything possible to offer them protection, and acrobatics would swoop in from time to time to assist them in evading anything that couldn't be blocked. It didn't always work, but they remained more successful than not, slowly sapping his stamina. Of course, the same could be said for the guardians themselves. They were using up just as much energy, if not more, yet with no specific indications there was no way to determine who would win that contest.

It's just a puzzle, Dallion told himself. While an entry trial was meant to get rid of the riff raff, it also had to be completable. Dallion knew he had the skills. With a few more skills, he would have won without question. Even now, it was the guardians on the defensive, not him. To win, he had to take them out one at a time.

Vih. Dallion unsummoned his daggers. Get ready for something wild.

Before there was time for a response, Dallion summoned the shield in his hand and threw it straight at the guard dryad. Bracing himself for the impact, the guardian took a defensive posture. A blow never followed.

Cocoon, Dallion said.

The shield extended, curving quickly into a ball that captured the guard guardian inside. No doubt he would try to escape his prison, but since attack wasn't his primary skill, that would prove difficult.

Without wasting time, Dallion dashed in the direction of the acrobatics dryad. All two hundred of his instances flowed in that direction like a mighty river. By now the remaining guardians had figured out what the plan was and rushed to prevent Dallion from succeeding. Sadly, there was nothing they could do.

Got you, Dallion said, as he pressed the acrobatics dryad with a series of slashes and plunges.

## **MODERATE STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 150%**

Red rectangles appeared one after the other. Two times out of three, the dryad managed to evade the attack, but that proved insufficient to change the outcome. Dallion ignored the corresponding attacks, focusing entirely on taking out the enemy. The dryad desperately tried to escape, but despite his attempts, ten instances of Dallion constantly moved with him, striking all the time.

## **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 5%**

A vine struck through Dallions shoulder. It would have been easy to avoid it by simply choosing one of dozens more instances. That would have erased the very achievement he had fought so hard for.

**You have defeated the Door Guardian Esen.**

**Defeat the guardians and change the lands destiny.**

Several more attacks continued, then abruptly stopped as the two free dryads stepped back.

Are you hanging on, Vih? Dallion asked, fading all but ten of his instances.

You dont think much of me, do you? The shield guardian sighed.

Suddenly, a terrible thought came to Dallions mind.

Is the trial still ongoing? he turned to the dryads.

He had been explicitly told only to use the four common combat skills. Did that extend to the shields abilities?

No, the attack dryad said.

That wasnt the answer Dallion wanted to hear. Technically, it wasnt too much of a loss. The whole matter with the Order of the Twelve Suns, no matter how interesting on a personal level, was getting him sidetracked. Failing would allow him to focus on what was really

You have passed the trial, the dryad finished.

A blink of the eye later, Dallion was back in the small entry room, his hand on the massive door.

Congratulations, Unnie said. That was the second fastest someone has passed the trial.

Second fastest?

Apparently, he had completed the trial after all.

Who was the fastest?

The second emperor, came the reply. Eight candidates managed to kill all the guardians though. And over half killed more than one.

The comment was as sobering as an ice-cold shower. That meant that Dallions combat skills were average at most as far as the Order of the Sun was concerned. Not that it mattered. As one following the path of empathy, it was expected for him to be physically weaker. Still, he had hoped for something more.

Please. The guide invited him. Open the door.

Dallion did. A vast hall extended in front of him, containing several rows of large tables, and countless smaller ones. The only way he could describe it was a mix between a mess hall and a tavern if they were located within a throne room chamber. Paintings and portraits decorated the

walls, along with the occasional framed weapon. The scenes were similar to the ones in the entrance room, but with a lot more detail, also they contained a lot more recent examples. Dallion quickly recognized a younger version of Archduke Lanitol in one of the smaller portraits at the far end of the hall. The man who he had believed to be undefeatable not too long ago looked like a young rookie adventurer full of eagerness and hope.

The common room, the guide repeated. Reserved for all who have mastered their common skills.

There were a dozen people there at present, making the hall seem deserted. None of them paying Dallion any particular attention.

Its the largest room in the Order, as you might expect. You are free to come and go at any time. And feel free to discuss anything you wish here. Regardless of events outside of this room, whatever happens in the Order remains in the Order.

That sounded suspiciously similar to an Earth saying Dallion knew.

Wheres your spot? Dallion looked at the woman. Or dont you have any?

There are no spots in the common room, Unnie replied. Thats reserved for the Uncommon Room and beyond. In order to get there, all you have to do is pass through that door. She pointed at a large metal door that glowed in an otherworldly shimmer. Only this time you must only use your uncommon skills.

Dallion walked directly to it.

From what he could tell, the door lacked a guardian. Placing his hand on the metal surface, he attempted to enter the realm, but reality didnt change. It was as if the door didnt exist.

Where did you get the metal? He moved his hand away.

The founding members gathered it from otherworlders, then used their forging skills to construct this. The only way in is to forge a key that would unlock it.

Just that? Dallion looked carefully at the door, but he could see no lock.

Naturally, magic isnt allowed. The woman smiled. Would you like to try?

Good question, Dallion thought. Did he need to? Other than satisfying his own curiosity, was there a need to rush things? He had become a member of the Order of Twelve Suns and no doubt gained a lot of status. Potentially, he was in a better standing when it came to the emperor. Would going up the ranks grant him anything more?

Maybe later, he said after a while. I have an audience with the emperor. He turned around.

Nice try, he thought as he walked out of the building. This was nothing but another temptation to bend him to the emperors will and keep him in the city. Dallion still had a settlement to develop, not to mention prepare for a potential Azure attack. Above all, he needed to find a way to the emperor and get Adzorg out as soon as possible.

Chapter 857: Events in Motion

An overseer was waiting for Dallion the moment he left the Suns Order building. She was one of the older variety, though not one Dallion had seen before. With an entire district of overseers in the city, it was difficult to keep track.

Well done, Count Elazni. The overseer greeted him. The emperor will see you now.

Im grateful. Rather convenient that he calls me just when I pass my initiation trial.

A sphere of reality formed around the both of them, then slid through streets and buildings all the way to the imperial palace. It was very much what Dallion had used in the wilderness, though markedly on a smaller scale. Overseers had dominion only within the area they maintained; domain rulers had control between areas as well.

The garden, I assume? Dallion asked.

The emperor will see you in the southern library.

The library? An interesting choice, though when the emperor was concerned, that could well turn out to be anything. Dallion was just as likely to walk into a grand chamber made of books as into a small room filled with library items. As it turned out, both were true at once. The chamber was a majestic hall, containing hundreds of portraits and statues of past emperors. In addition, it also contained just as many marble columns, each with dozens of sky silver cubes.

Please wait here, the overseer said, taking a step back. The emperor will join you shortly. And with that she melted into the floor, leaving Dallion alone.

He definitely aims to impress, Dallion thought, looking around.

The emperor doesnt need to impress, dear boy, Adzorg said. All this is to impress him. Or rather, his ancestors. The libraries were built as gifts from eager nobles and family members.

A library is all it takes to marry into the imperial family? Dallion approached the nearest marble pillar. Seems rather cheap.

A massive set of doors opened at the far end of the hall. Before Dallion could fully turn around and look in that direction, the figure of the emperor was standing a few feet away. His presence was blinding as always, the purple glow only partially dimmed by the clothes of moon platinum thread he was wearing.

Instantly, Dallion bowed down.

Each of them is a realm in itself, the emperor said. Supposedly, they contain more scrolls than a mortal can read in their lifetime. Thats, of course, if that person isnt awakened.

Of course, emperor. Dallion let out a polite chuckle in confirmation of the rulers joke.

Our father made us go through a few growing up, the emperor continued. We expect its inevitable. Skills must be learned, knowledge conveyed he waved his hand. You can take a stroll if youd like. Its fair to warn you that the library guardians are rather strict.

Thank you, emperor. Maybe some other time.

Hed gone through his own similar experience with Adzorg a while back. By the looks of things, this might have been where the old mage had gotten the idea.

Thats what we used to tell our father. The emperor smiled. Unfortunately, it didnt work back then. So, I heard youve taken your first step. How does it feel to have a domain of your own?

Its different, sire. There were a lot of other words Dallion could have used, but this was the safest. Showing too much enthusiasm could trap him into having to repay the kindness, while too little would be considered an insult.

Different. Havent heard that description before, but youre right. Theres nothing like being a domain ruler. Personally, we found the experience depressing. When we passed the gate, cities we used to admire were suddenly reduced to nothing but common items. Very large items, but items nonetheless.

I think I understand what you mean, emperor.

Of course you do. Youre an empath. A pity there are so few of us left. A flicker of sadness slipped through the emperors guard the only emotions Dallion had sensed from him. But on to other matters. Youve come to claim your reward, we take it? Even if your settlement has a current population of one?

Ill be heading to Nerosal for more immediately after our audience, sire. Dallion was quick to add.

Ah, Nerosal. The place you were born.

That was far from the truth, but Dallion had no intention of disagreeing. After all, from a certain point of view, it could be said to be the truth. Thats where he became what he was today. Back in Dherma he was a single digit awakened who knew nothing of the gates and nature of awakened. Dallion could still remember the arguments with Veil and Gloria about whether double digit awakened existed. The day that Dame Vesuvia had entered the village for the hunt had shattered his understanding of the world, that was for sure.

We could give you the entire city, if you wish, the emperor said casually. Itll save you some time. The place needs to be cleaned up and is wasted in the hands of the Order.

Chills ran all over Dallions skin.

Thank you, emperor. I think I should avoid shortcuts at this stage.

There was a moment of silence. It was difficult to tell whether the response had insulted the emperor or not. When the emperor nodded, Dallion let out an internal sigh of relief.

Yes, that might be better. We dont want you to become another Lanitol.

Lanitol, sire? Dallion asked before he could stop himself.

One of the contenders approached our father for assistance during the last civil war. Neither of the pretenders were competent, so our father decided to agree with the request. What did that lead to? Another civil war forty years later. If we hadnt been betrayed up north, Priscord would have taken the province. Shes shown competence and ambition.

More ambition than competence, Dallion said to himself. If he hadn't helped her, there was every chance that the former countess would have lacked the support necessary to proceed with her plans.

Thank you, emperor. Dallion hesitated. There's one more request that I'd like to make.

Oh? The smile on the emperor's face indicated he was genuinely amused. You can always ask. We'll determine if you'll receive it.

The nymphs have sent water golems into the east. This was the moment of truth. If there was a point at which the emperor would be angered, it would be now.

Water golems. Are you certain?

I faced one myself, sire. They had made attempts to destroy a settlement of yours and a few belonging to the Order.

She's sneakier than I gave her credit for. The emperor's voice was softer than before. Thank you for pointing that out. We'll see whether it's necessary to take matters in our own hands. And your request?

I'd like your permission to grow my domain to the size of a county.

As becoming of your current title. The spark of amusement returned to the emperor's expression. Of course. We grant you permission to grow as much as you like and take out any Azure forces in the process.

Of course, emperor. Dallion bowed down again.

We must reflect on the matter you brought to us. A blink of the eye later, the emperor was back at the distant doors of the hall. His speed was such that Dallion could barely see the afterimage of his movements.

Sire! he almost shouted. What about Adzorg?

The door closed shut.

Damn it! Dallion thought.

There's no point in worrying about that, dear boy, Adzorg said from within Dallion's realm. I'll be sure to bring up the matter during the next time we see each other.

*You're a bit too calm about this.*

*It's not like the conditions of my prison are bad. What you really should be worried about is the emperor's reaction.*

*I'd be annoyed too if the enemy is capable of sending spies throughout my domain.*

*Seems, even now, you have a few things left to learn. The emperor knows everything. Having something of this significance pass through his domain is more than a bit unnerving.*

*It isn't the first time it's happened.*



*Actually, it is. The display the nymph empress made to announce her return was terrifying, but it remained just a spell countered within minutes. This is a whole different matter.*

The door near Dallion opened. The overseer that had brought him stood there with a blank expression. With a measured bow she indicated that Dallion had overstayed his welcome.

I know, Dallion said beneath his breath, making his way to her. Moments later, the bubble formed around them.

One moment he was in the palace and the next he was at the entrance of his own mansion. The thought of what he might find inside quickly made Dallion turn away.

Thanks for the trip, he said over his shoulder.

Dallion expected the overseer to disappear into the ground as usual. Instead, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality shifted. Suddenly Dallion found himself in a land lacking form. Amorphous shapes continued to the horizon, constantly changing color, shape, and size. Only the three Moons visible in the sky remained static, glowing in their brilliance.

**SHANDOR is Level 47**

**BODY 32**

**MIND 82**

**REACTION 41**

**PERCEPTION 43**

**MAGIC (0)**

A blue rectangle glowed brightly in the air, making it clear that this was a personal realm. The name of its owner was just as atypical as the realm itself, bringing Dallion to one possible conclusion.

I didnt know copyettes could impersonate overseers, he said.

Everythings possible, the overseer that had been with him till a moment ago emerged from the ground. Its just a matter of difficulty.

Things must be pretty serious for you to bring me here. Whats the development?

You must reach the inner sanctum of the Suns Order, the copyette replied. As quickly as possible.

Why? Isnt being a member enough?

Youre not a member. You just got your foot in the door. The emperor doesnt even recognize the members of the common room. You must reach the uncommon room at least to become noticed.

The Order of the Seven Moons seemed to know a lot about a so-called secret society. Based on the selective way the information was conveyed, Dallion gathered they didnt have a spy there, or at least not one who was a copyette.

Why is it so important?

The war isn't going well. The Alliance's losses are increasing and the eastern borders are scouted by water golems, as you've seen.

Isn't that supposed to be a good thing? It weakens the emperor's grasp and

If he's weakened too much, he'll decide to cut his losses and offer a deal. The war's going on only because it's more beneficial for the emperor to remain on the offensive. When the Alliance falls, only he and the Azures will remain in the world. It's almost certain that Tamin will offer a deal and up his guard. Also, there's no telling how much damage the nymphs do to the Order before they stop.

And me joining the secret club will change that?

The archbishop thinks it will. Once in the inner sanctum, you'll have direct access to the emperor at will.

Excitement rushed through Dallion. Having direct access to the emperor was one step from being seen as his equal, not to mention it would make his work for the Order a lot easier.

You've blown your chance today, the copyette continued. If you don't go to Nerosal, he'll suspect something is wrong. Don't be fooled by the way the emperor behaves. He's a lot more competent than anyone gives him credit for—that's one of the effects of his domain.

I know.

It had been a while since Dallion had figured out the reason behind the major paradox of the imperial capital. Everyone knew beyond doubt that the emperor was close to omnipotent. At the same time, they were constantly coming up with plots to gain his favor and carve a bit more power for themselves. The majority of even powerful noble families were simultaneously convinced that the emperor was too strong to be taken on head on, while airheaded enough not to see, or care about all the political intrigue that had become part of everyday life.

If I go right now, I might lose Adzorg.

If you don't prove that you can grow your domain beyond the size of a village, you won't get him either way. Gain a town, get into the inner sanctum of the Sun's Order, and we might get our chance.

## Chapter 858: Imperial Envoy

The more things changed, the more they remained the same. Dallion had seen dozens of different faces of Nerosal. The city had dazzled him with its size, showing him a world in which thousands of awakened lived among the non-awakened. It had been in this place that he had learned of awakened professions, guilds, and other organizations. Here, he had found knowledge, friends, love, but also pain and betrayal.

Seeing the emblem of an imperial house on his vest, the gate guards fell to their knees. The sounds of horns filled the air, indicating the visit of an important guest. It wouldn't be long before the lord mayor or a representative rushed to the scene. It was annoying, but something Dallion had to put up with. After all, he was about to claim segments of the city as his own.

Make way for the imperial envoy! Yells were heard further within the city.

Just great, Dallion sighed. Maybe it would have been better if he had come here incognito after all.

A figure dressed in black emerged on the threshold the overseer he had come to know well.

I humbly greet you back to your city, Hero of Nerosal, she said with a slight bow. Her tone was very serious, but Dallion could sense the humor emanating from her.

Very funny, he whispered as he passed by.

I thought you'd appreciate it, she replied. I'm here to escort you to the lord mayor's palace.

Part of the etiquette?

In the back of Dallion's mind, a voice whispered that he didn't have to go through this. He was a domain ruler and count of House Elazni. The local noble was inferior to him both in rank and power, not to mention awakening level. If Dallion wanted, he could ignore him without any consequences.

It's expected, the overseer said. Though not obligatory.

Only expected, he thought.

I think

You should talk to him, Harp said from within his domain.

Harp? Dallion asked. Lately, it was rare for her to initiate a conversation on her own.

*You're not strong enough to be rude. You're never strong enough to be rude*

I'll go see the old guild master, Dallion said, changing his initial decision. It's been a while, after all.

*Harp*

, he added. *Once this is over, we'll have a talk.*

The harpist's word guardian didn't respond.

I mean it, Harp.

The streets were crowded to the brim. Everyone who could had climbed to the roofs of buildings, while the rest packed on either side of the street. Somehow the whole event reminded Dallion of the time he had been sent to the first noble job, along with Gloria and Veil. Seemingly a lifetime away, he had suffered the heat and stares, dressed in an outfit of metal threads. Now he was walking to the palace in simple hunter's attire. Rather, most of it was simple; his shirt, for one, was made entirely of diamond threads.

Guards stood among the crowd, in purely ornamental fashion. Everyone knew better than to attack a member of an imperial house. Even if they thought they had the strength to take on Dallion himself, the emperor had destroyed cities for less. And even if that threat was not enough, Nerosal's overseer was a few steps away, able to react to any potential threat.

You haven't changed the arena, Dallion noted. I thought after last time you'd add a few statues of the Moons here and there.

The bishop decided it would be over the top. It's the inside that went through a lot of changes.

Typical of him. I'll have to remember to say hi after my visit.

That would be difficult. Cleric was called to the archbishop a few days ago. Until he returns, the city remains without a bishop.

An alarming development. The archbishop didn't do anything on a whim.

Reaching the palace took almost an hour. It would have been a lot faster under normal circumstances, but Dallion had decided to play his part and walked at an extremely slow pace, so that everyone could get a good look at him. Gradually, the crowds started to thin until they disappeared altogether. The guards remained. It seemed that even after all this time, the new lord mayor wasn't able to find awakened he trusted to make his personal guards. What little there had been was all gone, and he had been forced to rely on the overseer. Not the worst choice, considering the alternative.

The entrance hall shared characteristics of Archduke Lanitol's palace. Of course, it was a lot smaller and simpler in design. Several servants stood ready, bowing low as Dallion approached. Their scant numbers made the whole structure feel like an empty shell no, rather, it felt like a prison in which a minor noble had been forced to stay.

Palace, Dallion said, using his empathy skill. Should I be worried about anything?

Boredom, the area guardian replied. There are twenty-three people here, and only three are remotely powerful.

*Three?*

*The count got married.*

*I'll keep that in mind.*

Dallion was taken through a vast hallway, up a flight of stairs, and straight into the throne room. Two soldiers guarded the door, their awakening levels in the low forties. Normally, this would be the point at which the overseer would stop, leaving him to proceed alone. This time, she did no such thing.

Announcing Count Dallion Elazni, one of the guards said loudly, as both of them pushed both sides of the hall's doors open with their backs. Hero of Nerosal, Battlemage of the Mage Academy, and potential heir of House Elazni.

You still missed my hunter title, Dallion grumbled internally.

Walking on, Dallion entered a hall of silver and gold that compared to the opulence he'd become used to in the imperial capital seemed like a well-kept dump. Someone had spent a lot of effort attempting to polish up the room in an attempt to make it more noble-like. Not a terrible job, everything considered, but only if a person had no basis for comparison.

The former Icepicker guild master was seated on a small throne. Despite all attempts, his expression was tired and neither his pretense nor his dark skin was able to hide that from Dallions perception trait. A second empty throne stood nearby, probably belonging to his wife. Curious that she was absent for the occasion.

Count Lanitol, Dallion said, acknowledging the mans status.

Count Elazni, the other said in response. Overseer, give us some privacy.

As the order was uttered, a barrier of reality formed along the floors and wall. From here on, only the people within the throne room would be able to hear and see the conversation.

Now that were done with the bullshit, what do you want?

Harsh, guild master. Dallion smiled.

I know you well enough, Dal. You might be an imperial, but you still dont want to waste time on nonsense., Neither do I. So, what is it?

The arena.

You want the arena? The man blinked. After destroying it?

The destruction wasnt one-sided.

What do you want it for? Dont tell me youre restoring the festival.

You have to admit, it was one of the better things about the countesss reign.

Maybe at one point, but not anymore. There are too many bad memories associated with it.

Let me rephrase that. I want to take the arena and move it to my own settlement.

The former guild master started coughing as if hed choked on his own saliva.

Take the entire structure?

You said there are a lot of bad memories associated with it.

You cant just the man began, but his words quickly trailed off. Well, maybe you can. After some of the things youve pulled Why not? He waved his hand in utter disinterest. Take it. Take this palace while youre at it. Place is more trouble than its worth.

Sadly, I dont need a prison. Dallion could sympathize. Along with that, Id also like the citys furies, unless they want to remain here, of course.

Count Lanitols eyes widened. He leaned forward, a spark of interest emanating from him.

Youre planning your move, arent you?

Yes. The emperor has given me space and I intend to fill it with what I think is best. Dallion paused for a moment. If you were still my guild master, I would have taken you as well, but as things stand, youll have to wait for a while longer.

Always the optimist. I remember telling myself it was a mistake letting you go at the time. Even after all your messes, I still considered you having what it took to make a guild lieutenant. Nice to see that I wasnt wrong.

Thank you.

You can take the furies. As for the arena, youll have to take it up with the Order. They pretend that they let me do everything I want, but the moment I set a toe outside their invisible bonds, they are quick to remind me.

Ill deal with them.

I hope so, for your sake. Anything else?

I want the Icepickers. And the Gremlins Timepiece.

The mans expression didnt change. The lack of surprise suggested that he had expected something of the sort. If the bouquet of emotions emanating from was any indication, he was even pleased with the request.

The Icepickers and Hannah, Count Lanitol repeated. Im fairly sure the Icepickers will go with you. Hannah, though. She might be difficult to convince.

Thats my problem. Im asking you for old times sake. And also because of the guardians. Otherwise, itll be like ripping them from their home.

Youre making things up, arent you? Vihrogon asked. Theres no such thing.

*Maybe not. Lets give the old guild master this. Hes been getting a raw deal ever since he was sent to Nerosal.*

The arena with its furies, the inn with the Icepickers. Anything else?

Id think thats plenty.

It is, but why stop here? How about Eurys workshop? It wont be difficult to buy it, considering your present funds.

The place where Dallion first met the gorgon. There was no denying that theyd had a lot of pleasant moments there together. Taking it would indeed have been a nice touch, but it came with too much nostalgia for Dallions liking. He didnt need old memories to remind him of joy, at least not yet. There would be plenty more to come in the near future.

Thats enough.

In that case, I vow by the Moons that you can have what youve requested. With my blessing, if that means anything.

It does. Thank you, guild master.

Nah. Count Lanitol looked away. You earned that by yourself. Lets just hope you end up in a better cage than I did.

Not bad advice as far as warnings went, but nothing Dallion hadnt considered so far. For a split second, he considered improving the palace a bit in appreciation, but that would undoubtedly cause issues. Even if he were to relinquish power to the area, hed never be able to erase the doubt whether

the palace wasn't his domain. It was better, and safer, to leave things as they were. Maybe when he'd established a proper domain of his own, he could consider making the former guildmaster a vassal.

My apologies, Dallion said, remembering something all of a sudden. There's one other thing I'd like to ask.

There always is.

The world items. Are any of them still here?

The swords? Everything of value was moved to the archduke's treasury. I've no idea what happened during the provincial war, but unless they were stolen, they should be there.

Good to know.

Dallion felt a grain of disappointment. Lanitol wasn't a place he was eager to visit again. Having a few more aura swords would have been useful, but not vital. He had achieved what he'd come here for. Now all that remained was to inform the Icepickers and convince Hannah to move with him. The innkeeper was known to be stubborn, but given that Adzorg would eventually be sent to Sandstorm village, there was no reason for her not to agree to go there. In the end, it was all a matter of persuasion.

#### Chapter 859: City Piece Gathering

I know you're here, Hannah said as she kept on polishing a quartz glass.

There was no need for her to do so. In fact, there was no need for her to do anything. Her assistance in taking down the general had been noted by both the lord mayor and the Order of the Seven Moons, which had generously provided her with enough gold to buy a house on the edge of the city's noble district and live in opulence for the rest of her life. Instead, she had chosen to remain where she was and the money was stashed away to buy enough food and drinks for the inn not to have to worry about it.

When I worked for Adzorg, it was my job to keep track of thieving mages. She turned to her right. Plus, your illusion sucks.

I should have known, Dallion said, dropping his spell. In a flash of an eye, he was suddenly there, sitting at the bar across from her. I've come to talk.

When a noble says that, it's usually bad news.

I'm hoping the talk will turn into something more. Can we go into the kitchen?

The Icepickers in the room kept discussing jobs and standings. The guild was doing relatively well for itself. Even with artifacts no longer bringing in anywhere nearly as much money as before, the city still relied on them for sanitation work. Though by no means as lucrative, it ensured a steady flow of funds and, relatively speaking, the job was no different than before.

None of them were able to notice Dallion's presence. Even if he had dropped his illusion for Hannah, he had kept it for everyone else.

We're fine here, Hannah said.

Pan might want to be part of this.

Pan knows a lot more than you think. So, you started your own little settlement and are having issues filling it? She gave Dallion an annoyed glare. Taking the furies, taking the Icepickers, and then the hunters too, I'd guess?

My, my. Pan sure knows a lot.

What do you expect? He was a damned copyette emperor! The innkeeper hissed. And before you ask, the answer is no.

So, you wouldn't mind joining me? Dallion flashed a smile.

That only worked when you were a newbie. The woman barely reacted. Don't get me wrong. I still like you, but there's a time when a woman must acknowledge her limits. Facing the general showed me where mine were.

You're stronger than most I've met.

Gratitude emanated from the woman, combined with elements of sadness.

Knowing you, you probably mean it. That only makes it worse I know where you're going, even if you don't. That's part of my curse. Both you and Eury have set your aims on the top. Every otherworlder does sooner or later. The only ones who don't are those who've died or given up.

Dallion cast a two-circle spell, summoning a glass of nectar in front of him. It was an expensive drink more expensive than the inn itself, but at his level of perception, he had learned to pamper himself a bit from time to time.

I only want to end the war, he said after a sip.

Funny. I'm sure that's what everyone says.

I mean it.

So do they, I'm sure. Have you noticed how few wars there've been within the empire?

I know a lot of people who'd disagree.

And they'd be wrong. Everyone talks about the Wetie civil wars and the west frontier skirmishes, never taking the wilderness into account. The Imperial legions didn't roam the wilderness for fun. We, the hunters, and even the Academy snuffed out most threats before they could cause any damage. Historically, it used to be normal for settlements to vanish, destroyed by chainlings or other wilderness creatures.

There still are wars, Dallion said in a somber tone.

But you plan to stop them and for that, you need my strength, right? Hannah crossed her arms.

There was no denying that she was right. Dallion's short-term goals were to gain enough strength and influence to get close and neutralize the Tamin Emperor. His long-term goals were indeed to become the sole power of the world. If walking through the next gate would make him a Moon, he'd do anything to join their ranks. Then he'd be able to adjust the rules of the world so that the void couldn't tempt anyone and not only that.



You dont need me, Dal. Hannah turned away. This fight youre aiming for is for the strong, not a sealed has-been such as me. Ill leave Pan to make his own mind, but

What if I unseal you? Dallion asked.

The innkeeper froze.

If I make you an awakened again, right here and now, will you join Adzorg by my side?

Youve become a real bastard, the innkeeper whispered. The temptation was too much for even her to refuse and Dallion knew it. Even after years of acceptance and discipline, an awakened could never forget the sensation. They could pretend that they did, they could even convince themselves for a while, but when the option was given to them, there could be only one way forward.

Sorry. Dallion stood up and walked up to Hannah. Is that a yes?

The innkeeper turned around.

Dallion placed his hand on her shoulder.

### **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality was replaced by a room without doors or windows. The familiar blue rectangle floated in the middle, stone walls surrounding it on all sides. The only difference was that in Hannahs case, they were made of crystal.

Thats a new one, Dallion said. Didnt know you could get that.

Im a domain ruler. The innkeeper quickly slashed through the rectangle before Dallion could get a good look at it. Or was. Things are a bit different.

Right, Dallion thought. Any changes I should know about, Adzorg?

Im definitely not the right person to ask, the former archmage replied. At the time, I used artifacts to make up for her lost skills, but Ive never considered unsealing her. Thats usually done for lesser awakened. In theory, its not even supposed to be possible, thus the diamond walls.

So, this is diamond. Dallion slid his hand along a wall. They were perfectly smooth, as if made of glass.

At least as hard, Hannah admitted. I tried breaking through it in the early days.

Dallion concentrated, examining the room with his aether vision. Magic threads went through the diamond bricks, like a mesh. At first glance, there was no indication of a door opening of any sort. Looking closer, though, one could see places in which the threads were slightly unaligned, as if someone had cut through, then hastily glued them back together.

Any skills you can use? Dallion kept on following the cuts throughout the room.

Im sealed, not delevelled, Hannah said. I can use what Ive learned, but I dont get help.

So, no markers. Dallion summoned his Nox dagger, then carved a line in part of the wall.

A slight scar appeared on Hannahs cheek.

*Careful, dear boy. Try to force through it and you'll end up killing her.*

So, that was part of the game. Dallion had wondered what the penalty would be. With the last person he'd helped, he had put his own awakening powers at risk. In this case, Hannah's life was on the line, which was the exact thing he was after.

I've good news and bad news, he said. Looks like this whole thing is a puzzle.

And the good news?

Your life's on the line.

I knew there was a silver lining. The woman didn't seem overly concerned.

You could be a bit more engaged.

Because a boy that used to cry in his room a few years ago has come to return my powers? I remember when you stood in my inn bleeding and crying that the Mirror Pool had stolen your precious gear. Don't think that just because you've gained some skills, you're infallible.

*I've gained all the skills, Dallion corrected mentally.*

You're not the first to try to unseal me, so I know perfectly what's at stake.

Unsummoning the Nox dagger, Dallion cast a flight spell on himself. There was a good chance there would be combat in most cases, when dealing with awakening powers, it always came to that. Then again, there was a slight chance that the challenge was entirely mental. When he had unsealed his mother, there hadn't been any fighting, although she had only been a level one awakened.

Do you remember your realm? Dallion asked.

It's not something I could forget. Believe me, I've tried.

What was it like?

You're asking me that? She crossed her arms.

If the room was a folded representation of her realm, then having an idea of what it was like might prove to be the key to unfolding it without causing any tears. Dallion had already established that it wasn't a simple matter of rearranging pieces, like in a mending maze.

A mansion, the woman said.

A mansion? Dallion looked at her. Didn't you have one as a noble?

A mansion, not a city full of them.

A mansion on a field, he said, more to himself.

There probably was some charm to it for someone who'd spent their entire life in a bustling city of nobles. Some calm and quiet away from it all could be bliss. As a hunter, he knew the feeling all too well.

Get ready, Dallion summoned his hammer. I want to try something. He flew up to where he could see a prominent cut in the magic threads. This might hurt.

Counting to three, he then swung the hammer, hitting the brick with the cut. During the impact, his magic threads extended, entering within the diamond. Splitting into instances, Dallion manipulated the threads in a series of ways, from attempting to absorb them, to combining them together. All the time, he had one instance carefully observe Hannah.

On the surface, nothing happened, but within he saw a magic thread appear. In one instance, the faint thread appeared among the rest, then slowly faded away.

You gotta be kidding. Dallion laughed.

I take it that's the bad news?

The Order never sealed you.

Im not in the mood for jokes.

Youve been doing it.

Giving up. It was said that the vast majority of awakened gave up along the way, stopping at comfortable levels. The lower levels preferred the comfort of the Moons protection. The mid-levels wanted to shield themselves from constantly looking over their shoulder. Even the high-levels chose to take a rest at what they saw as the pinnacle of their life. The same was valid for the sealed as well. The Order didnt do anything; rather, they merely implemented a trick that had people fight against themselves. The seal was trauma loss that shook an awakened's very being to the point that they built a wall around themselves to protect them from a similar experience. Despite the pain and suffering the wall brought, they viewed it as better than the alternative, and that was because beyond it there was another part of them that was so traumatized it had them protecting that wall and fighting to keep it whole with everything they had.

In confirmation of Dallion's words, the walls and ceiling of the room shattered, bringing them to a new realm. Vast fields were visible all around, along with a single giant mansion in the far distance.

You shouldn't have done that, Hannah said, but it was a different Hannah.

A girl dressed in light sun gold armor blocked the way to the mansion; the spitting image of the person Dallion had seen in her memories. She was a prodigy, one who had become a domain-ruler on her own, one who had mastered eight of the twelve skills and whose body and reaction traits were slightly higher than Dallion's.

When I made the decision to join the Imperial Legions, I made the decision to block off the part of me that led me here. Im content now. Im happy.

Any chance we can discuss this so I change your mind? Dallion asked, adding as much calm to his words as his music skill allowed him.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

*Guess not.*

Chapter 860: Facing a Prodigy

**Hannah**

**Species: HUMAN**

**Class: DOMAIN RULER**

**Health: 100%**

**Traits:**

- **BODY 99**
- **MIND 68**
- **REACTION 105**
- **PERCEPTION 87**

**Skills:**

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **ACROBATICS**
- **FORGING**
- **ART**
- **CARVING**
- **SCHOLAR**

**Weakness: NONE**

So, this was facing a prodigy. Trait values alone were enough to crush most awakened, even starting domain rulers. Without magic or familiar companions, winning in a direct confrontation would have been an almost impossible task. The current situation wasn't that much different. While Dallion had superior skills and two traits that provided an advantage, he also had to be careful not to hurt his opponent too much: take too much damage and Hannah would remain sealed; deal too much and she'd be resealed as a result of the fight.

Guess there's a reason for high-level unsealing to be exceedingly difficult. If Adzorg were to be believed, there hadn't been a domain ruler unsealing in modern history.

Line attack! Both Dallion and Hannah said simultaneously.

Two lines of destruction flew at each other with incredible speed.

**MUTUAL ATTACK NEGATION**

**Both attacks have been split in two.**

**Attacks have no effect.**

Both sides had bared their fangs, displaying their determination to attack. In another life, Dallion might have resorted to fair play, avoiding the use of magic advantages. However, this wasn't a battle in which he could afford such frivolity.

Lux, Gleam, keep her occupied! he ordered, summoning his aura sword.

Both familiars emerged in the realm just as Dallions second weapon formed within his left hand. Hannah didnt remain idle, either, summoning three additional swords. While one appeared in her free hand, the other two attached to her boots.

Isnt that impractical? Dallion asked, using his music skills in an attempt to weaken his opponent. It would have been different in the air, but running about in those might be a bit tricky.

In response, a pair of daggers emerged, attaching themselves to Hannahs belt. The moment they did, magic threads shot out from them, surrounding her entire body. It only took a second for Dallion to read the instructions within the threads: Hannah had just received a permanent flight spell.

*Thats untypical.*

Well, when I said that I used artifacts to compensate for her losses, I didnt mention that some of them are awakened domain ones, Adzorg explained.

That would have been nice to know, Dallion grumbled mentally.

*Artifacts arent an exact science. I had assumed they had been destroyed after her banishment. They were only intended for defense in the case someone has the bright idea of challenging her by invading her realm.*

Like what Im doing? Dallion waved his aura sword, casting flight and a full set of aether armor.

Gleam had already engaged the young innkeeper, bombarding her with wind attacks. All of them were avoided without issue, even granting Hannah a few guard bonuses in the process.

## **MODERATE WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 20%**

A red rectangle popped up as Hannah combined her guard bonus with her standard speed, making the attack unavoidable.

Dallions aether armor shattered, leaving his left side exposed. If it hadnt been for the spell, he probably would have suffered twice as much damage.

Lux! he shouted.

Yes, boss! The firebird flew right at him, surrounding his body in blue flames. It had been a while since Dallion had resorted to the familiars constant healing. Now felt like a good time to do so.

Taking advantage of his proximity to Hannah, Dallion immediately went on the counteroffensive. Twisting through the air, he proceeded with a series of blade slashes and offensive magic spells. The benefit of having an aura sword allowed him to combine the two effortlessly. Water droplets shot out from his harpsisword in the same fashion he has seen nymphs fight.

## **MINOR STRIKE**

**Dealt damage increased by 10%**

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### **Dealt damage increased by 10%**

A series of red rectangles emerged above Hannah. The first fraction of a second, Dallion was pleased. The next, though, his mood quickly changed.

Lux, Heal her! He ordered, casting an aether spell between him and Hannah to protect the girl from his own attacks.

Boss? the firebird chirped, confused.

Do it!

With some hesitation, the blue flames jumped off Dallion on their way to Hannah. Before reaching her, though, the girl did a triple slash attack, aimed solely at the creature.

## **MODERATE WOUND**

### **Your health has been reduced by 20%**

Three red rectangles popped up. Before a fourth one could emerge, the firebird flashed out of the realm, returning to Dallions own.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion slashed with the magic sword, in an attempt to capture Hannah in an aether sphere. Dozens of spheres filled up the nearby space, each merely capturing the spot where Hannah had been fractions of a second ago. A few seconds later, the distance between the two opponents was close to half a mile once more.

Going all out from the start? Dallion asked. Life as a Legion captain must have been boring.

You have no idea, Hannah admitted.

Dallions mind was racing. The brief exchange had proven that hed have to change his methods. The question was how exactly. If they werent in a vast open realm, he might have used a spell to flood it with water, or used some other method to make her lose consciousness. As it stood, that wasnt an option.

Youre in a tough spot, Gleam told Dallion. Shes still testing you. She has a lot of strong moves in store.

That sounded just like what a seasoned awakened would dostart with a bunch, but keep a few aces in the sleeve. No wonder that March respected her so much.

It would be a waste not making use of all that power, Dallion said. So many possibilities, sealed away because of a promise.

Its a lot easier to keep the promise than to break through it, she replied. Ive accepted my life. This version of me is nothing but an old regret that could never be.

Why not?

You think its easy to win against yourself? A flash of anger emanated from Hannah. This isnt like an awakened trial where you can change your mind. Dont you think that if it were up to willpower alone, someone would have unsealed themselves by now? Sealing is the point of no return. You cant

lift yourself up by your bootstraps you need someone else to help you do it, and that person must have the strength to see it through.

Was that a call for help? Dallion couldnt tell. From what he could sense with his music skills, it was more like stating cold facts.

Cant you accept my decision? she asked.

Youre asking me to give up?

I want to save you some time and effort. Give up now and we can say that youre fulfilling my request. After everything Ive done for you, you owe me that much.

After everything youve done for me, I owe you to break your seal. I want the domain ruler back, the one who wanted to prove to the world that shes so much better than everyone thought.

And I can prove that as one of your minions?

As one of my friends. You know I cannot do this alone. Ill need the help of many. People I know. People I trust.

Gleam, start releasing sleep powder, Dallion ordered mentally.

In a realm this size? The shardfly protested.

*At some point, there will be enough to affect her.*

*You know that she can blow it away with a simple line attack? And she could do four at once.*

*As I said, at some point there will be enough to affect her.*

The familiar remained silent for a few seconds.

Youre one crazy kid, you know that? Gleam fluttered up higher into the sky.

Help me change the world, Hannah, Dallion continued, playing for time.

The blades the girl was holding trembled.

Is that the point of your ambition? she asked. To take over the world?

I Dallion thought about it. It definitely hadnt started that way, but the more he looked at things, the more he was convinced that he had no choice. Maybe if things were as peaceful as when he first went to Nerosal, things would be different.

If it wasnt for Arthurows, he would have remained in the guild, happily clearing items and rising up the ranks. He wouldnt have aimed to become a hunter, shifting to become a forger, instead. Hed still have ended up with Euryas otherworlders, they were bound to attract each other. True, he would never have learned about Diroh, but Jiroh might well have remained in this world, working in Hannahs inn and doing hunter missions on the side.

No, even that wouldnt have lasted for long. Things were already in motion. With no one to stop him, the Star would have taken Nerosal and then moved to swallow up the rest of the world in his attempt to rid it of magic. The conflict between Priscord and Lanitol would have come to pass using some other excuse. As for the poison plague and the following global wars, they would have

proceeded as well. Calm wasn't in the cards. If Dallion wanted that, his only option was to find a quiet place in the wilderness and spend the rest of his days there, far from everything.

It seemed that was the otherworlder's fate to conquer the world or die trying.

Yes, he said. He could have claimed that it would be better than the alternative, but that was likely what everyone claimed.

Why not let someone else conquer it? Does it have to be you?

A smile appeared on Dallion's face.

I don't think I have a choice. Was I fooling myself to think that I ever did?

Then you understand exactly what I'm going through. I can't unseal myself.

Then I'll prove that I can. As Adzorg would say, if Dallion had troubles unsealing a domain ruler, what chance did he have when it came to facing the really powerful opponents?

Unsummoning the aura sword, Dallion switched the way he was holding the harpsword and played a chord. Strands shot out, amplified by magic, attempting to attach themselves to Hannah. Her emotions were stable enough for the connection to take place, but before they could reach, two line attacks slashed through them, putting a quick end to the attempt.

Two more line attacks flew in Dallion's direction.

It's on, Dallion thought as he played another chord, while simultaneously performing two point attacks/kicks.

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**You've shattered HANNAH's line attack.**

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**You've shattered HANNAH's line attack.**

**Attack has no effect.**

Passive dominance, Dallion thought.

This was a page from the emperor's book. The strong won their victories by attacking their opponents; the really strong won by having their opponents attack instead.

You're playing a dangerous game, dear boy, Adzorg said. Hannah isn't someone you should give carte blanche to when it comes to attacking.

It's the best strategic move, Dallion said, casting a defensive spell between two chords on his harpsword.

*Maybe, but even if you're right, that's only half a win. You still have to claim the victory.*

*What was it that you kept yelling at me at the time? It's not a sprint, it's a marathon?*



*I dont believe Ive ever said that, dear boy. But even so, chipping away at someone with a higher body trait tends to be on the impossible side.*

*Not if I use a bit of magic.*

A resounding sigh filled Dallions domain.

*Trust me, I am familiar with the magic well enough to have taken that into consideration. It still wont be enough.*

*Of course it will.*

A series of aether barriers appeared in the air in an attempt to slow down Hannahs attacks. Since Dallion had changed his approach, so had she, going into an all-out attack.

*Its all about thinking out of the box.*