

Leveling up 871

Chapter 871: Reaching the Max

The temptation to make use of the skills altar was great and in the end Dallion proved incapable of resisting. There was a small amount of concern that it might end up being a trap, but both Vihrogon and Adzorg were adamant that the Moons wouldnt allow meddling at such a level. Dallion had also asked Harp for her opinion, but the nymph seemed somewhat designated, merely saying that shed back him up if needed.

SHRINE AWAKENING

A green rectangle emerged. The realm was different from what Dallion imagined it to be. Instead of a hundred archways, there were only twelve. All but three were bricked up, allowing Dallion to advance only to the maximum level.

Pretty standard so far, Dallion said, going towards the archway marked HERBOLOGY. Right, Harp?

The nymph didnt reply.

Nothing has been standard so far, dear boy, Adzorg said. Ignoring that the Order of the Sun has kept a remarkable artifact secret for over five centuries, theres been no mention of it in any work before that.

It definitely didnt exist during my time, Vihrogon added.

Summoning his aura sword, Dallion stepped through the arch. A vast field opened before him. The smell of fresh grass filled the air. After a few seconds, Dallion found that the smell wasnt coming from the field.

SHRINE GUARDIAN

Species: SHRUBBERPILLAR

Class: FLORA

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY: 60**
- **MIND: 60**
- **REACTION: 50**
- **PERCEPTION: 50**
- **EMPATHY: 20**

Skills

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**

- **ENTANGLE (Species Unique)**
- **LEAF RAIN (Species Unique)**
- **POISON (Species Unique)**

Weakness: NONE

While seeing an unprotected white rectangle felt reassuring, this was the first time Dallion had seen a creature of this sort. Not waiting to find out, he immediately attacked with a series of line slashes.

COMBAT INITIATED

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

You have broken through HERBOLOGYs seventy-third barrier

Your HERBOLOGY SKILL has increased to 73

Thats new, Dallion said.

That was overkill, Vihrogon said. You didnt need to go all out on a caterpillar.

Its traits werent that low.

Youre a domain ruler, kid. Everything beneath eighty is low.

As the shrine guardian disappeared in a cloud of glowing dust, a new archway appeared behind him. It also had the word HERBOLOGY written on it, only this time there was a number as well: seventy-four.

Doesnt sound too difficult, Dallion went forward.

As it turned out, he was absolutely right. In the next sixteen fights, it took longer for him to reach the next archway than defeat the guardians themselves. Ignoring Vihrogons complaints, Dallion slashed all of them from a distance in the most efficient way possible. On multiple occasions, he had tried to convince them to surrender, but apparently that wasnt an option in this shrine. Even when guardians acknowledged his superiority, they attempted to fight, regardless of the outcome.

After almost half an hour, Dallion was back in the main section of the realm, only this time all but two archways were blocked up. Two skills remained: spellcraft and zoology. Having a pretty good idea what to expect, Dallion decided to maximize his zoology skills first.

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The more wins he stacked up, the more he understood the Order of the Twelve Suns focus on combat. The altar was a massively overpowered cheat in more ways than one. For one thing, it allowed mastery of skills though combat alone. Technically, there always was a possibility that a non-combat skill would be increased upon improving an item or area, but special effort had to be put in. Here, it was just fight, fight, and fight. All that one needed to have was the appropriate trait, and Dallion had all of them.

You have broken through SPELLCRAFTs hundredth barrier

Your SPELLCRAFT SKILL has increased to 100.

The coveted rectangle appeared, marking the final level of the final skill Dallion had. A few moments later, the rectangles acknowledged it as well.

SMALL CAP

(+1 Body, +1 Mind, +1 Reaction, +1 Perception, +1 Empathy, +1 Magic)

Youve maxed out all your skills. Some might call it cheating, but a wins a win. Just keep in mind, you wont get the same reward for maxing your traits.

Dallion kept on staring at the achievement, uncertain what to think. It would have been ironic if the emperor had provided him with the opportunity to get strong enough to take him on. Would have, because from what Dallion remembered, the emperors skills were at a hundred and twenty. Number differences aside, that wasnt supposed to be possible and served as another reminder that he had to up his game, and fast.

Taking one final look at the bricked-out arches, Dallion returned to the real world.

Feels different, doesnt it? Pierce asked, remaining a distance away from the altar. I remember my first time there. Spent weeks inside.

Yeah. Ill have to do it again sometime, Dallion lied.

It still doesnt compare to the real thing, Astra said, a note of regret in her voice.

Judging by the emanation coming from Pierce, he shared the sentiment.

Who made this? Dallion asked.

Thats the big question, isnt it? Pierce laughed. Who knows? Its been here since the Order of the Twelve Suns was established. Possibly its a remnant from a former age.

Remnant of a former age Which one, though? It didnt look like a copyette creation and Harp would have mentioned if it were nymph, even if she had been acting strangely lately.

Thanks for the boost. Dallion left the illusionary gazebo. See you around.

With as little as a wave, he left the inner sanctum, then the Zodiac building altogether. Peeking beneath the curtain had gained him a bit of insight, but that still wasnt the big picture. Despite his determination to consider himself a player on the world scene, he was still being used. Joining the Order of the Twelve Suns was just another move made by the archbishop, though the purpose remained unclear.

Youre still using me more than Im using you, Dallion thought.

Adzorg, any news on your release? He asked.

Yes, though not what I expected, the old mage sighed. Apparently, Im just being moved to another section of the palace. Things tend to move very slowly when the emperor isnt personally involved. By the loops of things it might be a few weeks before Im officially placed in your care.

Good.

Good? Personal issues aside, didnt you need to stabilize things in your settlements?

Yes, but theres something I need more.

Dallion didnt return to his mansion, nor did he venture to the imperial palace. Instead, he flew up, leaving the capital as quickly as possible. Half a dozen bladerers flew up alongside him, more as a reminder than anything else. Keeping their distance, they followed him for ten seconds, after which they broke off, returning to their usual spots. Dallion paid them no notice. Mentally, he was preparing himself for the conversation to come. For what he needed, he had to return to his home village, and he didnt want that, not with the things he had learned so far. The grandfather he had liked so much as a child and even more after it had become obvious that he was an otherworlder turned out to be everything Dallion despised. At some point, he knew that hed have to have a conversation with the old man, but the more he thought about it, the more he wished to delay it.

Casting an invisibility illusion on himself, Dallion increased his speed, heading straight for Dherma. As he moved further away from the capital, the density of cloud forts sharply decreased. Lately, most of them were sent straight to the western front, with only a handful remaining in proximity to the imperial capital. All other provinces were left to the care of their respective archdukes.

The borders are getting wider,

Vihrogon said. *That leaves a greater field for wilderness beasts to form.*

The Order will fill in the gap, Dallion replied. The Order of the Seven Moons, he quickly clarified.

I doubt it. With you taking in all the hunters, things are going to be rough for the smaller settlements.

Dallion said nothing

Something to keep in mind, the dryad guardian added.

Stale heat filled the air as Dallion reached Dherma. The town had grown even more since the last time he had been here. The original area of the settlement was now no more than the central plaza, surrounded by impressive buildings that would be at home in most cities. Only two things remained as they were before: the well-fountain that Dallion had found Nox in, and the village chiefs mansion.

Thanks to his new powers, Dallion was able to see the full area of the domain, like a sphere containing the settlement and its surrounding area. He could also see another presence the Order of the Seven Moons. Shrines had crept up in the town itself, each linked to a far greater power. Unlike all other areas within the Tamin Empire, they werent part of it, defying its authority with a strength of their own.

There were far fewer clusters of magic threads within the mansion, as if the place had been largely deserted.

Thats unusual, Dallion said to himself, and flew through the domains barrier. Whos inside? He asked the mansions area guardian.

Master Luor, came the reply.

Full master? Interesting to hear. Where?

The guardian hesitatedan indication that Veil had earned the buildings respect.

You know were old friends. Dallion used his music skill to add calm and acceptance in his voice. Im just here to check on him.

Hes in the great hall.

Dallion flew into the courtyard, where he stopped an inch from the ground. There were no guards present, only plants and guardians. Yet, there was something morethe smell of alcohol, made hundreds of times stronger thanks to Dallions perception. Moments later, the door to the hall creaked open.

Long time, a figure walked out. On the outside, it had the appearance of the Veil Luor, only slightly older. However, there was little in common with the person Dallion used to know. His level had increased to the mid-forties, even if the number of skills hadnt. Above all, there was a strong bouquet of cold anger, regret, and hopelessness emanating from him. I knew sooner or later youd come here, baron.

Its count now, Dallion floated closer. How have you been, Veil?

As if you cant tell. The other snorted, then turned around, walking back into the hall.

Dallion followed.

The room was almost as he remembered it, everything in the same place as the first time hed set foot there. The only difference was that it wasnt the same room. The item guardians were different, most of them coming into being less than a year ago.

You made the old version of your house, Dallion noted.

Yeah. Brings back memories of the good old times.

Are times bad now? There was no indication the war had reached here, although news of it certainly had. Ill talk with the Order to

Theyre not the problem, Veil interrupted. And youre not either, if thats whats worrying you. He grabbed a half full mug on the table and took a gulp.

That didnt sound good.

Wheres the rest of the family?

Here and there. Some got married, some went to live in more prominent parts of town. Yeah, I can say that now, he let out a bitter laugh. More prominent parts. He took another gulp of his drink. Want some? Id offer a fresh glass, but

Its fine, Dallion said, floating up to Veil. I think youve had enough, though. He grabbed hold of the mug.

ITEM AWAKENING

Reality shifted, taking him to a vast wooden room that reeked of alcohol. Given the nature of the realm, that was to be expected.

Now, tell me whats really going on, Dallion turned to Veil.

I know, the other replied. He didnt raise his voice, not a single note of emotion was added, yet there wasnt any need. I know Im Star touched.

Chapter 872: The Offer

That part of humanity that betrayed the world and was cursed by the Moons as a result, Veil continued. Its all very interesting until you actually realize what it means.

I thought you knew, Dallion wanted to say. It was hardly a secret, especially since he believed it to have been discussed before. Even if that was the case, the emotions within Veil proved that he wasnt handling it too well.

Who told you? he asked.

Who do you think? A ball of spite the size of a melon formed within Veils head. The Moons did. A gift for passing the fourth gate. After you helped me pass through my sealed awakening gate, I swore Id never make the same mistake. Now, Im not sure whether staying at ten wasnt the better choice.

The Moons did that? Dallion wondered. He knew they were harsh, even heartless, but it didnt sound like something theyd do, not with their desire for more awakened in the world.

You know it happened ages ago, right? Dallion filled his words with joy, trying to diminish the negative emotions within his childhood friend. It doesnt mean that youre a cultist or anything. Besides, the Star is dead.

Suddenly, a terrifying thought came to mind. What if Veil turned out to be the new Star? He wasnt an otherworld, although he had seen more than most. The thought was quickly discarded. Dallion would have noticed if there were any void threads within him.

Trial effects, Adzorg said. No doubt about it.

Are you sure?

Dear boy, do you know why blonds rarely ever become nobles?

Because nobles snatch them to become overseers before that?

Because its too difficult, the old mage answered his own question. All the baggage they are born with doesnt just go away. You remember how difficult it was for you to level up near the end? Its far worse for them.

Aspion became a noble, Dallion countered.

Are you certain? News of a blond noble would have spread even to the Academy. Yes, he was given the title, but as you know that doesnt amount to much.

True, Dallion didnt have firsthand knowledge of the fact. He had seen the start of Aspions journey in the memory fragment, but not the end. The old man had become a noble, similar to Kraisten, but had he become a domain ruler?

Having trouble with your trials? Dallion asked.

Veils eyes narrowed. A new burst of anger sprouted within him.

Why are you here, Dal? He crossed his arms.

I know how to help you. Dallion avoided the question. Just as before.

How? Coming along and passing the trial for me? Thatll only make things harder later on.

Not if you have a permanent echo with you.

There was a long pause. Neither was pleased with the idea. Veil didnt particularly mind echoes, though he wasnt in a mood to get more help from Dallion. The option was far from optimal, given how easily the Order of the Seven Moons could take advantage of the situation.

I wont lie to you, Dallion decided to bet on the other approach. I plan to change the world.

The words had a much greater effect on the blond than all of Dallions music skills.

Ive already started. He continued, maintaining his momentum. Ive two settlements in the wilderness, and soon I plan to get more. Soon Ill have enough that everyone in the world will notice.

Taking over the world. A spark of ambition emerged in Veils eyes. Thats what you really came here for; youve come to reclaim Dherma.

No. Dallion shook his head. Not Dherma. Ive come to ask you to become my overseer.

Clusters of surprise filled Veils body, made all the more pronounced thanks to Dallions music skills.

Overseer?

I need to move about the world, and for that, I need to have someone I trust at my back.

Your overseer, Veil repeated. After everything that happened, you think Im a good choice? Or am I the only one you can find?

Youre the only one I trust enough to ask.

This was it. If Veil were to refuse, it would be now. All the negative emotions had subsided, but Dallion knew better than anyone that they were still there, infecting Luors domain.

Youll leave Dherma, start fresh.

When something sounds too good to be true, it usually isnt. Veil smirked. Whats the catch?

Im at war. Nymph scouting parties have found a way through the empire to my settlements. The Order of the Seven Moons is backing me, but theres no telling if that would be enough. And theres no guarantee they wont drop me.

Stolen novel; please report.

Sounds like fun.

Theres also one other thing Now came the potential deal-breaker. The Mirror Pool has come to my town.

Forget it! Veil snapped, turning away.

There was no other choice. I need awakened for whats coming and they were willing. Plus, they all agreed to take a Moon vow that theyll stay in line.

Oh, so the whole thing about nearly killing my sister is alright?

No, Dallion thought. It isnt.

I know exactly how it feels, trust me. They almost killed me as well. With whats to come, not taking them in was the worse alternative. Its a temporary compromise. Hunters will start coming in. When theres enough of them, the Mirror Pool wont be an issue. I really hate myself right now. Thats why I came to ask you, not order you like an imperial. I had no idea of the state youre in.

And if you did? Veil briskly turned around. Would you still have come?

Dallion frowned. Yes, he said after a few seconds. Id still have tried. To change the world, I need people I could trust.

Ive become just like my grandfather. Initially, there had been hatred between the two, which had changed into friendship after Dallions awakening. Now, he was taking advantage of that friendship to convince Veil to effectively become a chainling. The worst part was that he already knew that he had won the argument. The Luor was pretending to be hesitant, but the emotions visible within him had already shifted in Dallions favor.

Overseer of a Mirror Pool town, the blond said slowly. What the heck. Im already at rock bottom. How much worse could it get?

Internally, Dallion let out a sigh of relief.

Anything else I should know?

Youll see when you get there. For the most part, trust no one, but pretend you do.

Standard family politics. How Ive missed those. Veil went to Dallion and slammed his hand on the others back. This time, Dallion didnt budge. I missed your craziness. Reminds me of the good old days.

Were there ever any good old days? Dallion forced a smile.

Give me a few days to make the arrangements. You can talk to your folks if you want. I know your brother has

No, Dallion interrupted. Theres a lot of other things I need to focus on.

You wont even see your mother? Shes

The Order is taking good care of her, Im sure. Besides, I dont think shell be happy to see me right now.

Yeah. Right. I might not have your level, but I know a problem when I see one. Its stupid to talk about changing the world when you cant see your own family. I dont know what happened, but Its sorted, Dallion lied. Just a price I must live with.

Veil shrugged, not in the least convinced. Did you visit Gloria, at least? I know you were invited to her wedding before before things happened.

In all honesty, Dallion had barely thought about her. There were moments in his life when he thought there might be something between the two of them. There still was a chance that there could have been, but neither he nor Gloria had taken the steps to see it happen. Ultimately, she had married a former Icepicker friend of Dallions, who was also a noble. Dallion had watched the relationship develop from a bud to something more, then severed all contact with the two. Of course, that was back during the Priscord-Lanitol war, when it was safer for people not to be associated with him.

You should go, Veil added. Theyll be happy to see you.

Maybe.

I know youre different from uspart of one world, living in another. Its easier for you to form and break attachments, but if you dont take the time to visit the people that meant something to you, you might never get the chance. Dont rely on them hanging on forever.

The same thing goes both ways, Dallion thought. Others could have taken the time to stay in touch with him, but for various reasons, they hadnt. Only Euryale and his guardians had, which made them closer to him than anyone else. Then again, there was no denying that Veil was right. Dallion could have put in a lot more effort. Maybe the real reason wasnt that he wanted nothing to do with them, but the grain of fear that seeing them would shatter the perfect image he held.

And I thought I had dealt with my internal weaknesses, he said to himself.

Get your things in order, he said. Ill go pay them a visit, then come to get you. Dont tell anyone Ive been here.

I thought as much.

Its not because of my family, its because of everyone else. Its better if people didnt know I came by. Youre the boss, boss. Veil let out a chuckle.

And one final thing. Do people still use the Ogre Gorge altar to awaken?

Lately, not that much. Everyone prefers the one in the Orders shrine, even if its a lot more expensive to use it.

Good, because well be taking it with us.

Realty shifted as Dallion left the mug. The stench of alcohol had largely gone, but there was enough to make him not want to be here.

See you soon, he said, then flew out of the hall, heading straight for the sky.

You could have stayed a few hours at least, Vihrogon stated his disapproval. Have a drink, reminisce about old times and all that. The life hes known so far will end in a week, after all.

Its better than the alternative.

I wouldnt know. Less painful, probably, but would it be better?

I just have to change the world and make sure it is.

FalknerGlorias husbandwas the heir to the count of Arlera. The third most prominent city in Wetie Province, it had avoided the impact of the civil war, even if the ruler was Archduke Lanitols brother.

Dallion had met the young noble during the Icepickers admission trial. The boy had specifically been sent to the guild to learn from March while carrying a batch of echoes in his realm, including that of his father. It was by pure chance that hed met Gloria Luor and fallen for her within minutes. It was almost sweet, despite the difference in social ranking. Even so, the two had stuck together and even married.

You know youre supposed to bring them a gift, the dryad guardian said.

My presence alone is a gift, Dallion replied in an attempt to lighten his mood.

As he said it, though, the strategic part of Dallions mind was already considering his next move. With Priscord gone, the province had reverted to Archduke Lanitol, but even now there were rumors that his position wasnt ideal. Even worse, none of his direct heirs seemed strong or skilled enough to take over. Falkners father wasnt in a very good position, either. While not hearing anything specific about the man in the imperial capital, there was talk that it was time for a new generation to take control of the southern provinces and fix the mistakes their parents had made. While no one expected it to happen in the next few years, Dallion had the music skills to precipitate the decision. Then, all he needed to do was take advantage of his relationship with Falkner and Gloria to have an allied province in the south of the empire.

Back to scary mode, it seems, Vihrogon remarked.

Dont worry, I wont force things.

I hope so. Thats how it starts

Chapter 873: The Two That Saved the Overseer

Black tendrils split the air, filling the sky with void droplets.

Spark, Dallion thought, slashing through them with a line attack. Spark filled his entire body to the point that any void that came less than a foot near would be instantly vaporized.

A glowing line of destruction flew down until it slammed into the ground, creating a large fissure. Unfortunately, the real target he was aiming at had managed to evade the attack.

Maybe exert a bit of restraint, dear boy? Adzorg asked from within Dallions realm.

Its the wilderness, Dallion replied, following up with a series of point attacks. While he was fighting a chainling and a rather annoying one at that in his mind, the enemy was someone greater. The emperor, the nymph empress, even Grym were a lot stronger. If he were to take them on, he'd have to reach their level at least.

Patches of ground exploded, drilled by the force of his attacks. The chainling tried to take advantage of the situation and hurl any and all debris at his attacker, but just as it was doing so, a cluster of aether chains emerged from a spontaneous void circle, grabbing into its black form like snakes. Dozens of mouths appeared near the affected area as the black entity tried to bite the bonds off, yet it was already too late.

Got you! Dallion did a final point attack with his harpsisword. The layer of water that had surrounded it flew forward like an arrow, piercing the silhouette of void and disintegrating it on the spot. Moments later, the only trace of the chainling was the destruction caused by the fight.

Well, at least theres no denying youve become more precise, Adzorg said. Still a bit wasteful. You could have won without causing all this damage.

Technically, the old mage was right, yet not exactly. As much as Dallion didn't like it, the precision Adzorg was referring to would have taken more energy than what he'd spent. That was the problem with focus. Even now, after all this time, it remained a greater problem than Dallion wanted to admit. The next time he leveled up, he was going to have to focus more on his perception trait.

Is it normal to have such a big one here? he asked as he looked down.

Sadly, its normal, Vihrogon replied. With all the forces focused on the lines between the three great powers, no one is focusing on the wilderness. It was the same last time.

By the looks of it, things were even worse. Arthurows attempt to conquer Nerosal had resulted in a large number of chainlings being destroyed. That had created a false sense of security. Now, years later, enough of them had gathered once more, forced to pack together due to the war fronts. The imperial legions or even the cloud forts could easily deal with them, but in a time of war, that wasn't their priority, so the beasts were allowed to roam the wilderness once more. The only reason there weren't many more of them was because the creatures still feared hunts. As the war continued, more and more of them would grow bolder, especially due to Dallions open invitation to the hunters.

Its never simple. He sighed internally.

Taking one quick look over the area just to be sure that there weren't any chainlings missing, Dallion continued his flight to Arlera. A large part of the previously established trade routes remained destroyed since the internal provincial conflict, but thankfully there were no more chainlings.

Dallion kept on flying through the night and half of the next morning. Then, finally, the city became visible on the horizon.

In many aspects, Arlera could be called just another city. Majestic in its own way, it was nothing like Lanitol or even Nerosal. Smaller, yet almost packed, it was a better example of a well-

organized modern city like those on Earth. The structures were bulkier and taller, with a lot less natural space between them. A complex infrastructure ensured that all parts of the city were accessible and easily reachable. It was similar to what Dallion would have done if he had enough inhabitants to create a city.

Funnily enough, this was the first time he was there. At first, he had the opportunity, but not the time. Then the time and not the opportunity. During his stay at the Academy, he had neither.

Thinking strategically again? Vihrogon asked in a disapproving tone.

Hardly, Dallion lied. It was a city, after all, and it would be reckless if he didn't give the notion at least some thought. I'm just here to see some old friends.

Hopefully, they still consider you one.

There didn't seem to be any reaction as Dallion neared the city. The gate guards, although awakened, were unable to see through his invisibility illusion. With everything going on, he'd have expected for Arlera to have at least a few mages.

Floating to the ground, Dallion removed his invisibility spell and continued forward. His sudden appearance created a commotion at the main gate. He could see messengers run about as fast as their body and reaction traits would allow. Meanwhile, others prepped their crossbows, aiming them straight at him.

So much for trusting an imperial, Dallion said beneath his breath.

You have to admit that an imperial appearing alone in the wilderness unannounced could be seen as somewhat suspicious, dear boy.

That was true, although in the back of his mind, Dallion had hoped that news of his exploits had reached this far.

The actual domain was miles away from the city, just beyond the crop fields. Seeing them unprotected would have seemed foolish at some point, but knowing a thing or two about the powers of domain rulers, Dallion didn't see it as an issue. Walls could always be erected at the blink of an eye.

Straightening his clothes with a quick spell, Dallion crossed the threshold. The moment he did, an overseer dressed in black emerged before him. This much was expected, yet there was a part of it that wasn't.

Gloria? Dallion almost felt like taking a step back.

He had strongly suspected that the main reason Falkner's father had accepted her into the family was because he wanted an overseer. Seeing her as one, though, was a whole different matter.

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Hello, Dal. The woman said with a reserved smile. You seem a bit different.

Look who's talking. Her blond hair and pale complexion contrasted with the obligatory black clothes she was wearing. I never thought you'd become an overseer.

Dallion took a step forward, half expecting her to stop him. To some degree, being sent away was preferable it would delay another inevitable decision he had to make. If there was one thing that he had learned while going through the awakening trials so far, it was that delaying decisions always came at a price. Also, if he were to become a domain ruler, he had to learn to impose his will on others.

I take it, I'm welcome again? he asked with a smile. To the city, I mean.

Of course you are, Count Elazni. Gloria bowed. You are related to the imperial family, after all.

Stepping to the side, the overseer let him continue on.

I wasn't sure how official you wanted this, so I've arranged for an incognito visit, the woman followed behind. If you want all the bells and whistles, I could arrange that.

Incognito is fine. I'm just here to see you and Falkner.

And the old count?

Just you and Falkner, Dallion repeated.

As the two approached the gate, Dallion could hear the whispers of the local plants and guardians. Haven't seen an empath before they were curious, discussing the matter between themselves.

This place has a lot of dryad guardians, Dallion thought.

It's a curse, Vihrogon sighed. Since we're the more social ones, we gather in clusters.

How was the wedding? Dallion asked casually.

As big as you might imagine. The beloved heir of the city bringing a platinum blonde of lesser standing, you could imagine the shock for some.

It didn't take long for them to accept you, I see.

It wasn't that difficult, given that I only had to convince one person.

He who controls the limiting echoes controls everyone else, Dallion said with a note of bitterness.

Sadly so. Given that grandpa raised me to serve as a bargaining chip, I made a deal. He'd have his overseer, but only if he accepted our union.

Dallion nodded. It was obvious she had taken the worse end. The life of an overseer was long and difficult. Even if Falkner became the count, she'd outlive him, never changing. Then again, at least she was better off than her great aunt.

An air of curiosity filled the city as Dallion made his way to the palace, escorted by the overseer. Even if Gloria had made sure not to announce his arrival, the attention he was getting stirred up things a lot. The same went double for all the guardians who now were openly attempting conversations with him, despite being politely ignored.

Not a bad deal, I guess, Dallion tried to sound supportive.

Thanks, that was only half of the deal.

Once they entered the palace, Dallion saw exactly what she had in mind. Normally, overseers weren't allowed to enter the home of the city ruler without a specific reason. Not only wasn't that true for Gloria, but she was still regarded as the heir's wife. And that wasn't all.

Inella. The overseer turned to one of the awakened maids. Please bring them. I'd like to introduce an old friend.

The Hero of Nerosal, milady? The servant looked at Dallion as if he were a living legend. Sadly, Dallion could tell by her emotions that she found him lacking.

Today he's just an old friend. Gloria didn't bother hiding her smile.

With a nod, the maid quickly disappeared along the corridor.

And here I was hoping to avoid the local nobility, Dallion sighed.

We all must make sacrifices. Come on, Fal is waiting.

To Dallion's relief, he was led up the stairs to the south wing of the palace. It was all very elegant, if modest. Three-dimensional paintings covered the walls—a combination of paintings and painted wooden reliefs. The landscapes were impressive, but the portraits had an uncanny valley effect that made it clear why the style hadn't caught on elsewhere in the empire.

Dallion expected to be led to a study, but to his surprise Falkner was waiting for him in the training area. The hall was wide, filled with various weapons and even more marble statues. In too many ways it was similar to his awakened training hall. A faint smell of sweat was still present, suggesting that the noble had been training up to a few hours ago.

Dallion, he said with a reserved smile. Glad to finally welcome you to my home.

Seems I'm not the only one thinking about politics. Hi, Falkner, Dallion approached. You're not going to challenge me to a fight, I hope?

Hardly. There's no way I could stand my ground against a count.

And still, you're a domain ruler. The man had grown a lot since the two had seen each other. Lean and muscular, he was now half a head taller than Dallion with broad shoulders and a stern expression.

I have already apologized regarding the wedding invitation. Gloria went beside her husband, quickly smoothing any ripples before they could happen. As expected, he was very understanding.

The least I could do after causing you so much problems, Dallion let out a polite laugh. You seem to be doing well. After seeing Nerosal I had concerns.

You can talk freely now, Gloria interrupted. I've isolated the room.

I really just came to see you, Dallion said, using his music skill to add calm into his voice. Someone told me not to waste the opportunity since there's no telling when I would have another.

That sounds like Veil.

It was Veil.

For a moment, the overseers smile faded.

I asked him to become my overseer, and he agreed. Dallion went straight to the point. Itll be official in a week or so.

So, you got him. There was a note of sadness in her voice. And here I was hoping that hed be able to avoid that

Apparently, it wasnt in the cards. The fourth gate hit him hard.

Ill take your word for it.

There was a moment of silence. Everyone had a pretty good idea what the topic of conversation would be, but no one wanted to start it. Ultimately, Dallion decided to do just that.

Changes are on the way, Dallion said. Theyll be soon and theyll be sudden.

Arlera is just a small city. We dont have a direct effect on the war, Falkner said, choosing his words carefully. I doubt the changes will affect us anytime soon.

True, but it all depends on how fast the nymphs advance. The Alliance of Stone and Steel is already having difficulties, if they crack, the empire will have to pick up the slack even this far south.

Dallion was taking a big risk sharing that. He could safely assume that both Falkner and Gloria were aware of the subtext. As much as it seemed that he was asking them to be ready to support the empire, he was actually asking them to personally support him. No doubt they couldnt imagine him going against the emperor himselfno noble couldbut they could perfectly accept the birth of a new archduke.

The south has never been particularly influential, Falkner mused out loud. Especially after all the latest developments.

Thats only because people failed to see its real significance. On its own, it might not be much, but if one were to expand to the east, the value would grow.

Youre planning to

There was a knock on the door, interrupting the conversation. Gloria immediately returned the room to its normal state and used her overseer abilities to open the door.

Two maids entered the room, each carrying a bundled-up baby of approximately half a year of age.

Perfect timing, Inella, Gloria smiled. Dal, Id like you to see my children: Dallion and Veil, named after the two people who saved my life, along with my husband.

Chapter 874: A New Overseer

Children, Dallion thought.

Gloria had agreed to the deal because of her children. As far as deals went this was the definition of perfect negotiation: both sides agreed to a compromise beyond what they were willing to accept and in return achieved everything they wanted.

You havent lost your touch. He looked at the overseer. For a single moment, a picture formed in front of him: that of the girl that had asked him to help her secretly increase her level. She, and later Veil, were everything Dallion needed

to keep his awakened powers then progress to defeat the village chief. They had done a lot together, things that had seemed impossible at the time.

You really can keep a secret, Dallion used all his skills to appear happy. Congratulations, you two. I cant believe I didnt hear about it.

I control the limiting echoes, Gloria said, taking one of the children in her arms. And everyone knows that an overseer cant have children.

Yes, everyone knows that. Well, I think Ill be going.

Already? Surprise streamed from Falkner. I thought there would be more to discuss.

Weve already gone through all the important bits. If the opportunity comes, youll know what to do. Either way, Ill do my best to keep the war from reaching Wetie. He gave the children another look.

You always were focused on your goals. Gloria nodded. Give me a moment and Ill escort you back out.

No need. Just make an opening to the sky. Will be faster that way.

No sooner had he said so than the ceiling twisted, forming a hole in the middle. Dallion quickly cast a flight spell and shot up like the cork off a champagne bottle. Glorias circumstances werent something he had expected, but even so there was a good chance that his message had gone through. After all, Falkner remained one of the viable heirs for the province. With the leaders of three major cities in a severely weakened state someone was going to have to take over and hopefully be more than a puppet for the Order of the Seven Moons.

Well, Ive said it before and Ill say it again, Vihrogon commented in a serious tone. Smooth visit.

Idiot. Dallion let out a smile.

Takes one to know one. Seriously, though. Might have not been the best idea to leave the question hanging. Do you trust theyll back you up when you need it?

I trust them enough.

There were no chainling sightings on the flight back to Dherma village. As a matter of fact, Dallion didnt spot anything at all. Even the sky was void of cloud forts. Meanwhile, he had heard from Gleam that things in his two settlements were going on rather well. Hannah was keeping everyone in check, making full use of the imperial training she had suppressed for all those years. Making use of the Mirror Pools talents, she had sent off awakened throughout the area to act as scouts in case there were other nymph attacks. Simultaneously, she had assisted Diroh with fortifying Stone Circle to the point of it being a viable defense. It was all a good first step, but as Vihrogon liked to remind, it remained merely a step.

Veil had managed to brush himself into shape, at least externally, by the time Dallion made it back to Dherma. The same precautions were used, just like last timeDallion dropped in invisible, found Veil, then flew out again. The difference was that unlike before, Veil was waiting.

Twenty minutes later the two of them were standing in front of the cave at Ogre Gorge.

They really are like colossi, Dallion thought. In the past he would never have guessed, but thanks to his perception and carving skills he could see it as clearly as if the creatures were standing before him.

Are we just going to stand here? Veil asked. I thought you were in a hurry.

Give me a minute to reminisce. Dallion kept on looking straight in. You could have told me about the children.

Actually, I couldn't have. Moon vowed.

There was no telling whether the blond was joking, but it was a reasonable precaution put in place. The less that was known about them the better. Dallion had no doubt that in another couple of years, there was every chance that Gloria would have to hide the fact she was their mother.

Lets go.

The trip inside was just as dark as he remembered it, or at least it would have been had Dallion not cast a light spell ten steps in. With all the power he had, there was no point in avoiding a bit of comfort.

The altar itself remained just as impressive and abandoned as the first time Dallion had seen it. It didn't have its own domain and at the same time it was the domain. The standard way of moving wouldn't work here.

Stay close, Dallion said. Ill claim the area and then well move back to your future home.

Optimistic as usual, a new voice said.

Dallion burst into instances. The moment he did, he found that there was a star-filled sky above him. Also, the ground had turned a glowing green.

What did I tell you about taking on Moon domains? Felygn appeared right beside the awakening altar. He was in his dryad form. Your realm is part of ours, not the other way around.

Im asleep? Dallion wondered.

Nope. Since this technically remains a shrine, I can talk to you as if you'd sent a prayer. The advantage of being my favorite.

Calling it an advantage was questionable in the current circumstances. One couldn't ignore the facts, though.

Its not forbidden to transport altars. Ive seen it happen before.

Dont worry, youre not in trouble. Im just here to offer some friendly advice.

Whenever a Moon said that, bad things usually followed.

It would be easier just to dig it up and transport it as an item. You have the skills for that, after all.

Why?

Youre on a battlefield for one thing. Messing with it might not be the best idea. Also, this is one of the better ones, so I dont want you to destroy it by mistake.

All that sounded reasonable, yet it wasn't reason enough for a Moon to appear.

How's the Moonstone hunting going, by the way? Felygn walked up to Dallion. As he did, a bench appeared at the spot. You better not let the opportunity pass you by.

You're saying it like the world is full of them.

At one point it was. We used to give them out like candy. Then again, those were different times. Even now there's more than you'd think, scattered about. The greatest problem is collectors.

Collectors?

People obsessed with gathering them, but not intending to use them.

Dallion was just about to say something, when a soft-drink can appeared, floating in front of his face.

Given how poorly you handle alcohol, I thought this would be more appropriate, the Green Moon said.

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Hesitantly, Dallion took the can and opened it. The smell of cherry mango filled his nostrils.

In a way, you're a collector too. You have four, but you're still missing three for your set, the Moon continued. I've just come to remind you that there's a way to fill it up. Take this for example. He reached forward. As he did, the altar instantly emerged a step away. Many of the old altars have Moonstones. The only issue is that you never know what type it would be. Centor has been flooding the world lately, so odds are it might be one of his. Of course, you might get lucky and score Astrezas. He's the secret rare, as they say.

Break it up and find a stone, Dallion repeated. Just like that?

Yep. Like a divine gotcha.

The comparison was painfully inappropriate, but if everything said so far was true, also on the spot.

And there will be no punishment?

And that's the reason I'm here in person, the Moon said. To assure you there won't be. You already have the altar. What you do with it is up to you. Do you move it to your future capital or do you break it and take what's inside?

What's the real story with the Moonstones?

No spoilers. Felygn smiled.

Are you finding all this amusing? Dallion asked.

Now you're just being nasty. Felygn stood up. A better question is, what would you like your story to be? You've achieved a lot so far. Others have achieved a lot as well. From here on, only one of you could keep leveling up. You've had it easy until now you had a personal pool of levels to claim. Now there's one common pool and competition is fierce.

What will happen when

There was a sudden flash of light. A split second later, Dallion was back in the cave.

Claim how exactly? Veil asked.

So, that was it? Leave it to a Moon to never finish a conversation. Why did he keep insisting on the emblem? Clearly, it was something important, but was it more important than anything else?

Its a magic thing, Dallion replied, still considering whether he should smash up the altar or bring it along. A level five altar wasnt going to grant a monumental advantage, but it was going to markedly increase the morale of his inhabitants. More than that, this was going to be his altar, not one belonging to the Order of the Seven Moons. Well dig it out and then Ill fly us to Sandstorm.

Digging up an ancient altar Veil frowned, then shrugged. Why not? Its not like Im on the Moons good list, anyway.

Bringing the altar out of the ground turned out to be a lot easier than expected. It could best be described as pulling out a tooth or a nail from a wooden board. Once in the air, it was extraordinary how small the object was, but with the power to change a persons life.

The more they flew, the more convinced Dallion was that he had made the right choice and kept the altar whole. Of course, the Green Moon had omitted to mention that an altar had a strong effect on every creature within miles. Star-spawn avoided it like the plague, while other creatures were strangely attracted even after Dallion cast a series of illusion spells on it.

It was a real relief finally arriving at Sandstorm. The town remained as crude as before, but at least it was safe. Dallion noticed several of the outlook pairs. On the whole they were well hidden, but the old habit of wearing disfocus items had made them easily noticeable.

This is it? Veil looked around. I see why you need my help.

Very funny. Dallion placed the altar on the ground. Veil was going to find a better spot for it. Want to look around? Hannahs in the other settlement, but shell be back in a few hours.

Nah, lets go through the motions. Ill be seeing a lot of everyone later.

Sure.

AREA AWAKENING

Dallion ventured into his domain. Taking a deep breath, he then pulled Veil in. In all honesty, no one had told him how to create an overseer. All he knew was that the platinum blonds were predisposed to take on the role.

Was that it? Veil asked. I dont feel different.

Just a moment. Dallion didnt want to openly admit that he had never done it before, so he followed his intuition.

Cant be much different from familiars, he thought, summoning the glass colossus.

The ground shook apart as the giant entity emerged. It wasnt anywhere near the size of the other guardian, but enough to get Veil to summon his weapons.

Chill it! Dallion said in a warning tone. He was looking at Veil, but the warning was to both him and the guardian. This is the current guardian.

Quite the big fellow. Veil let out a vicious smile, but lowered his swords. What does that make him? My assistant? My second in command?

Ignoring the question, Dallion transferred the guardian to Nerosal arena.

SANDSTORM guardian has been added to the land of ARENA.

SANDSTORM has no guardian!

If a new guardian isnt found, the land of SANDSTORM will collapse.

Are you sure you know what youre doing? Blobs of fear the size of oranges appeared within Veil.

Its fine. Just link your personal domain to mine.

The fear within Veil grew.

Are you sure thats a good idea? The Moons told me that they stop protecting awakened after the fourth gate.

Veil, if I wanted to invade your realm, I

Its not about invading! Theres a lot of bad stuff within me. If we link, are you sure it wont spill over?

That was a surprisingly good point. Dallion had the ability to destroy any void matter, should it flood his realms, but if he were to resort to that, he might very well destroy Veils ability to become an overseer.

Okay, then we do it the other way. He bent down and took a thread of magic from the ground.

You have created an open link from the land of SANDSTORM

Here, he offered the thread to the blond. Take this.

Veil looked at his hand.

Take what? he asked.

Dallion sighed. It was natural that Veil wouldnt be able to see it. Such links were only visible to mages and domain rulers, and currently his friend was neither.

Sorry about this. Dallion grabbed the others hand, then shoved the link into the palm.

You have opened a link between SANDSTORM and VEIL LUOR.

If the link is established, VEIL LUOR will be designated the lands new guardian.

Do you wish to force the link?

Force? That meant that overseers didnt have any choice in the matter; rather, they only had a choice should the domain ruler grant them one.

No, Dallion replied mentally. Veil, you might get a rectangle. If you do

VEIL LUOR has acknowledged the link.

VEIL LUOR is the new guardian of SANDSTORM.

VEIL LUORs new level is 50.

Three blue rectangles popped up.

I guess you did, he smiled. How does it feel?

Weird, the other replied. There are lots of new powers I must get used to.

His clothes darkened, turning pitch black. Apparently, he had gotten an idea how to use void matter, if nothing else.

Well, you have all the time in the world, overseer. Dallion gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Maybe, but you dont. The way I see it, half a legion attacks this place and youre done for.

Chapter 875: The Approaching Army

Veils assessment was rather harsh, but that didnt make it false. Constant training and daily leveling upsdriiven by Hannahhad given Dallions forces an initial boost, but not enough. In half a week, both the training stopped having an effect, and the trickle of new inhabitants was far from what the town needed to advance.

Fearing sneak attacks, Dallion would spend most of his days patrolling the area surrounding his territory. Even with the dozens of watcher groups Hannah had sent out, he could never be sure if a nymph or water golem hadnt snuck through. On several occasions he had even attempted to increase the citys level, but Veil had absolutely refused to take on the challenge under the pretext it was better to get the town running properly before increasing the area.

Dallion didnt like the comment, but he had to admit that the blonde was right. Despite his desire to grow, and the promising start of the two settlements, he was not ready for domain conqueringneither politically nor militarily. All he could do was wait until the population acquired the critical mass necessary to take that step; and waiting was something he wasnt good at.

The first step is always the hardest, Pan said.

The copyette had maintained his trader appearance. As far as everyone was concerned, he was a Fatunthe single wagon-traveling merchant who managed to enter Nerosal before the provincial war began. Thanks to a touch of music, everyone except those in the know believed him.

I lost everything twice before setting off on my conquest ambitions.

Dallion kept on hammering metal at the forge. The town had its own blacksmith, three even, but a request from a noble was more than a request, so no one refused when he asked to join in. Rather, they had discreetly left one at a time, leaving Dallion alone with his work.

Just like an avalanche, the copyette continued. Once you have enough for a snowball, youll have the mass to slam into another snowball and make it part of you, which will allow you to slam into an even bigger one and so on until

I get it. Dallion whipped the sweat off his forehead. Crafting magic weapons and armor in the real world could be difficult, especially after the third dozen.

Why are you here? The copyette asked. Equipment helps, but it doesnt win wars. Trust me, I know. Besides, youre not the only person who could do it.

Name one person who could forge weapons better than me.

I, for one, Pan replied unapologetically. If it hurts your ego, I could even take your form so that everyone could see what a flawless noble the town has.

Hmph.

Youre not useful here. Veils doing a good job as overseer, not to mention he has more practice than you. Hannah is holding the fort, Dis taken charge of the fury tower, even Gleam is better at exploring the surroundings than you.

Dallion remained silent.

So, Ill ask you again, what good are you here right now?

What if theres another attack while Im gone?

And what if there is? The copyette crossed his arms. Itll take you ten minutes to get to your domain in the capital, then another moment of real time to appear here.

But

Just go. Get the emperor to give you Adzorg. Youve been promised that for how long now?

I cant just force the emperor to do that.

Whos talking about forcing? Ask politely, collect some rumors about the war. Heck, even visit the Academy if that ups your mood, but dont spend your time forging equipment here when we both know youre just wasting time.

The last went too far. Dallion had matured enough not to take it to heart, but that didnt mean he was pleased. Back on Earth, he had often heard the phrase victim of his own success. Right now, he felt just like that. He had chosen the perfect foundations for his settlement, which eliminated the need for him to oversee everything. Yet, deep inside, he still didnt feel he could leave them completely on their own.

Look, Dallion began. He was about to add a lot more, when Veil emerged from the floor.

Were in trouble, the overseer said. Several watcher groups have just reported a large force coming this way.

What? Dallion summoned his aura sword, then cast three protection spells and a flight spell with a single slash through the air. From where?

The east. Hannah is on the way with details. Im just here to give you the heads-up.

An army from the east was precisely what Dallion had been dreading all this time. After the last encounter with the Azures, he knew that it was just a matter of time before things became serious. Now his fears had materialized.

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Grym, Dallion said beneath his breath.

The smithy door opened on its own, followed by Hannah rushing in in the form of a blur. All the people present were given one brief look, after which her attention focused on Dallion.

I guess you know.

Bits, Dallion replied. How many are there?

More than this place could handle. The advance force alone is several dozen thousand. I expect a lot more will be coming after.

Alright. Internally Dallion was screaming. He was so close to making his first major step as a domain ruler. A massive attack was going to crush him. The awakened he had gathered were no match for nymph forces. Even if Grym was invading with his human contingent, that too would be too much. Fortify Stone Circle. Ill ask the Order and the emperor for help.

Both of them? Pan asked.

What does it matter at this point? If we survive, they can hate me all they want.

Still jumping to conclusions, Hannah said with a sharp note of disapproval. Its not nymphs coming this way. Its gorgons.

That was something that Dallion didnt expect. Why would gorgons be making their way here? And coming from the east too?

Tell Di to return here, Dallion floated off the floor. Tell everyone who can to return to Sandstorm in half an hour. The rest are to scatter in the wilderness.

Wait, you cant face an army on your own, Veil began.

In a fraction of a second, Dallion used his domain ruler powers to split the buildings ceiling into two, then fly out as fast as lightning. Despite the overseers concerns, that was precisely what he intended to do. After going through dozens of possibilities, only two made sense, and either way he had to confirm it himself. It was time for some portal flight.

Wasting so much energy before a major battle isnt a wise idea, dear boy, Adzorg said. I can easily tell the emperor about

No! Dallion snapped, casting spells as he made his way to the mountain. Hes the last person who should learn.

This is no time to be stubborn.

Its bigger than that. I cant risk him seeing what Im about to do. Dallion put on his blocking ring, severing his connection with the mage. From here on, it was just him.

People and furies had already sprung into action. Dallion could see groups already flying in his direction while everyone near Sandstorm rushed to enter the town. Two fights in as many weeks at

this point, even the Mirror Pool were probably asking themselves whether it wouldnt have been safer for them to remain hidden within their cities.

Dallion covered himself in speed and smoothness symbols, aiming to reduce the time it took for him to reach the enemy forces. In the grand scope of things, he had probably increased his overall speed by a tenth, but even that was better than nothing.

In the back of his mind, he could almost hear everyones criticism. They had their reasons and most probably were right, but they werent him.

It took Dallion minutes to fly through the hole he had created in the mountain in the previous battle. The village within was shaping quite nicely, but he didnt bother looking at details, flying through like a bullet through a barrel. No one had told him how far the enemy was, but knowing Hannah, they had to be at least half a day away. At his current speed, that meant hed reach them in up to an hour.

The terrain seemed to dash beneath him. The valley of the last battle sped by, as did the mountain on the other side. This time, Dallion didnt use a spell to drill through it, but flew above. A vast mountain chain emerged, continuing to the horizon. That wasnt enough for him. Constantly casting portal spells, Dallion maintained his current vector, flying higher and higher. The distance between him and the mountain tops increased by the second until he was as high above them as they were from the lowest point of the valley. Then, he saw itproof of the thought he hadnt dared think before today.

The ocean, he thought, looking at the thin line of blue that made the horizon.

A few minutes later, he was able to see hundreds of ships covering it like specs of ground pepper. There were several clusters of them, making their way to the shore as fast as their mages would allow them. All of them, without exception, had the same flag marking them as part of the Stone and Steel Alliance. The world he had been part of for close to a decade was, in fact, a globe, and not once did anything hint at that.

Damn you, Felygn! Dallion thought. Id have hoped that at least youd tell me!

All the nonsense about the known world that everyone kept talking about was false. There was no unknown world! The Order of the Seven Moons wasnt exploring. They were preparing for the endgame, as they had been systematically doing for thousands of years. Right now, though, that wasnt his main concern.

Heading back down, Dallion continued towards the hidden shores. If gorgons were making their way towards his settlements, then Eury had to be there as well. Unless

No! Dallion said out loud. There was no way anything could happen to her. She was the Gorgon Empress that rode a dragon into battle.

The closer Dallion got to the approaching troops, the more his concern grew. Even straining his eyes, he could see no trace of Dark anywhere. The ships also seemed too much alike. They were large, there could be no doubt about that, but none of them could be described as a flagship.

A torrent of crossbow bolts flew up from the ground roughly in Dallions direction. With his trait levels, he could easily evade them even without using combat splitting. Normally, hed ignore the attempt, viewing it as inconsequential. However, in this instance, he couldnt afford to; there was

only one race with enough perception to spot him at such speed, and he desperately needed answers from them.

Splitting into a hundred instances, Dallion flew straight at the incoming crossbow bolts. At this speed, flying between them felt like running down a corridor with three soldiers at the end.

Seeing him approach, all the gorgons opened their eyes. Seeing them would be enough to instantly petrify any creature. Mages had no such problem.

Drop, Dallion said, casting a quick lightning shock spell.

Bolts of energy flew out of magic circles, zapping all soldiers numb. The bolts instantly stopped. Now, it was the gorgons turn to be paralyzed.

Where is she? he asked in an icy voice, stopping ten feet above them. Where is Euryale?

Chapter 876: Remnants of an Alliance

A cluster of darts flew at Dallion, emitting a slight whistle as they did. Most would think them easy to evade, and they would be wrong. It wasn't the tips of the darts that presented a danger, but the sound they emitted a high-pitched noise designed to spread terror to everyone who could hear. Dallion had no trouble spotting it, although it was very different from any music combination he had heard. His family of the imperial capital had perfected the art of using music to manipulate. This was an outright attack sound.

Never knew there was such stuff. Dallion deflected the attack with his aura blade. Spell circles formed, launching hundreds of aether shards at the hidden attacker. Several trees exploded, revealing another small group of gorgons. Dallion was just about to dash to them with a follow up attack when he recognized one of the soldiers.

You? he asked.

It had been a while, but there was no mistaking the face. Living a year with Euryale had taught Dallion how to distinguish between gorgon features. The one who had attacked him just now had been a mercenary once. Back during the phoenix hunt, he and his brother had trailed Dallion on the behest of another noble.

Dallion? The gorgon recognized him as well. Slowly, he raised his hands to the sides, giving a sign to the others of his small group to calm down. After a few tense seconds, they did.

This was the moment at which Dallion was supposed to reciprocate by returning the paralyzed gorgons to normal. Yet, he didn't.

You were a mercenary last time, Dallion said. Things seem to have changed.

War tends to do that, the other said cautiously. I heard you were a noble mage now.

And hunter. Dallion continued combat splitting, maintaining three dozen instances. Where's your brother?

Dead, the other replied. The vortex fields were bloody, but you should know that. You were there.

Dallion could sense the slight anger emanating from the gorgon. Did he blame him for what had happened back then?

Why are you here? Dallion went straight to the point. Wheres Eury?

The snakes on the gorgons head swirled.

Shes fine, he said, sensing where the conversation was going. Shes organizing things at the landing area. I'm part of the advance parties.

Dallions pulse quickened. She was alive. That was good. Although, why wasnt she with Dark, then?

Lead me, he ordered.

The coast wasnt too far away, yet even so, Dallion decided it would be better if they got there flying. On the way, he saw an increased gorgon presence. The watchers hadnt exaggerated when theyd said that thousands were coming. If all this was just an advance force, Dallion wouldnt be surprised if there were millions.

How bad is it? Dallion asked.

Id better leave the empress to tell you, the gorgon replied, suggesting it was bad. I can tell you it wasnt easy crossing the ocean.

Why do it, then?

It was better than the alternative.

Having a link to Adzorg would have been useful right now. Even technically a prisoner, the old mage was skilled at obtaining information. Sadly, the potential information wasnt worth sharing what Dallion had just seen.

Arriving at the coast, Dallion couldnt help but stare at the gorgons achievement. He had spotted the markings of a domain well before reaching it, yet not even he had expected the scale. An entire section of the coastal forest had been cut down and replaced by a settlement the size of a city. Nearly all the structures were made out of wood, with the sole goal of housing as many people as possible. There were no fields or crops of any kind, suggesting that the city hadnt existed for long. This could prove to be a serious issue in the short term.

Do you have any mages? Dallion asked the mercenary.

A few are left. They were the first thing that the Azures targeted.

Dallion was starting to see a pattern. The enemy always focused on the mages. For the Age of the Seventh Moon to start, they wanted to be sure they had a monopoly in the field.

Shes there. The gorgon pointed at a sturdy fort-like structure at the edge of the settlement. Id be careful, though. The guards are a bit overprotective. I cant just walk in there.

Theyll make an exception for me.

Several dozen crossbows were aimed at Dallion and his unwilling companion as he descended from the sky. Thankfully, not a single bolt was fired. That suggested that the gorgons had recognized him. Choosing not to push his luck, Dallion slowed down even more. A circle of emptiness formed

around him. A large part of the local inhabitants were dwarves and humans. Also, the majority weren't soldiers.

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This isn't a battle force, Dallion told himself. Everyone has fled here.

Im Count Dallion Elazni of the Tamin Empire, he said in a loud voice. Take me to Euryale.

Murmurs filled the crowd. A large part didn't seem to know him at all and were outraged by the request. In contrast, the ones that recognized him understood the request all too well.

Get back to what you're doing! A dwarf clad in armor approached. It was clear by the elaborate design that he held a high rank. You, count, come with me.

Local etiquette was far from what Dallion was used to. In a sense, it was funny that he would make a big deal about this, given how often he had messed up. Floating an inch above the ground, he followed the dwarf.

Good luck, the ex-mercenary gorgon shouted behind him. Don't get killed.

The murmurs on the ground increased as Dallion was taken to the settlement's headquarters. None of the guards were particularly appreciative, but let them through. If it weren't for the blocker item, Dallion would have already asked about the situation. As things stood, he'd have to wait to find out.

There were no doors inside the building. What had the appearance of a wooden structure was heavily reinforced with metal. Solid sheets of iron blocked segments of the hallways. Every so often the dwarf would drive his hand through them, then create an opening for Dallion to pass, as if he were pulling a curtain. Finally, they reached a single wooden door.

She's in there, the dwarf said.

You're not joining me.

Not on your life, the dwarf replied with something between a grumble and a chuckle. Since you're a mage, you can leave by yourself. He turned around and walked through the sheet of metal.

Paying no notice, Dallion rushed forward and swung the door open.

Only you would rush in like this. A cluster of snakes observed Dallion as he entered. Close the door, will you?

There was no doubt that this was Eury. Seeing her, it became instantly clear why she wasn't with the other troops. The entire left side of her body was covered in scorch marks. A gorgon mage sat nearby, maintaining a healing spell in an attempt to repair some of the damage. Dallion had never seen him before, but he could clearly see he wasn't anywhere as skilled as a proper healing mage. In terms of magic talent, he was barely an apprentice.

That's enough, Eury said, the snakes looking in the direction of the mage moving about slightly. Dallion will take over, won't he?

The hint was clear. Without a word, the gorgon mage stood up and quickly left the room, closing the door behind him.

Dallion went and took the empty seat. Looking at Eury made his heart sink.

That bad? she asked with her typical smile. One didnt have to have music skills to know that she wasnt at all feeling happy.

Bad enough. Dallion cast a seven-circle healing spell. A green circle appeared above the gorgons shoulder. How did it happen?

This? Magic ray. Similar to what the mages used in the vortex fields, but differentmore nymphy.

Ive seen the effects. Should have you healed up in a few hours, he lied. At best, it would be days before the worst was over. You certainly brought a lot of troops. I thought that

No, she interrupted. I brought all of them. This is all thats left of the Alliance.

That was enough to send chills down Dallions spine.

The coastal area is lost. A few dwarf kingdoms are putting up some resistance in the mountains, but that wont last. Its only the Azures and the empire now.

That was the worst possible outcome. Dallion had hoped the Alliance would act as a counterbalance for him to take advantage of when facing the other two players. Even worse, he couldnt even imagine what effect that would have on the gorgon. To see so much death and destruction, her own forces driven to cross nymph territory in a desperate attempt to escape, as well as effectively imposing a cap on her level. There was no coming back from this.

Well hold them off, he said. Well make a stand here. The Order of the Seven Moons will assist us.

I dont think we have that much time. The clash weakened them enough for Tamin to wedge in, but that wont keep them occupied for long. The moment the new lines are drawn, theyll make use of the sea and head this way.

Now I know why they didnt go all out against me, Dallion thought. He had been very wrong in his previous reasoning. The water golems hadnt sneaked through the empire, but were probing its defenses from the other side of the globe. The only thing that kept them from launching an attack was the Alliance in their back. Now, that had changed.

Well have enough. Ill make sure of it.

Generals dont win wars alone, Dal. Well need armies, and I doubt well have enough to stop whats coming.

Well only be fighting part of them. The empires still active on the other side.

The healing continued in silence. Both had imagined their reunion a lot differently. The complicated game of politics had been the final obstacle keeping them apart. Now that it was no longer present, none of them felt like celebrating. Yes, they were and would be together, but for how long?

It was only when evening fell that Dallion paused for a break. Magic in itself wasnt tiring, but took a toll when performed for a long period of time.

Any better? he asked.

The gorgons snakes swirled, indicating that it was.

There are strands of magic in your flesh. He found the need to explain what he was doing. My spells healing you while Im taking them out one by one. Its not pretty, but it works. Ive seen it before. Wheres Dark?

Probably back with the Moon. He stayed to give us a head start. I told him not to overdo it, but you know him.

Yes a kid to the end. Dallion was uncertain what to say next. The one time he could actually use Vihrogons advice, but couldnt afford to take his blocker ring off. How many do you have? he decided to take the pragmatic approach. By now his echoes had probably told Gleam about the situation, and she had hopefully shared it with Hannah.

Three-four million. Most of them civilians. Theres a chance that a few more ships make it here, but Do you have your blocker ring on? she asked all of a sudden.

Dallion nodded. In his mind, he could almost hear her say she was grateful. Like most gorgons, she didnt want to be seen at her weakest. There was only one correct response to thattake control and make everyone who inflicted this to Eury pay.

Ill make it work, he said, his voice resonating with calm power. Therell be no running, no begging. This will be where the Azures fallthe strongest city in the east and my capital.

Chapter 877: New Capital

ALLIANCE Level not increased due to lack of inhabitants

5000000 inhabitants required for ALLIANCE to improve further

The CAPITAL CITY remains Level 13

So, thats the limit, Dallion thought. All the remnants of the alliance that had seemed so large a day ago now were insignificant in the terms of the world. With all resources currently at his disposal, Dallion had only managed to create a city the size of a provincial capital. The empire had two dozen such cities, not to mention the imperial capital itself. Even so, this was enough to quickly boost his level to a hundred and nine. It wasnt the new city that had achieved that, though, but the territory he had gained between his three settlements.

All the leveling points had been placed on perception, raising the trait to ninety-two hopefully enough for Dallion to make use of his awakened markers again. With what was coming, he was going to need them.

It wasnt only external issues that concerned him. A sudden change of this magnitude was bound to have a deep political impact, and it did. For starters, all of Dallions previous settlements including Sandstorm, which he had thought would be the domain capital were thrown to the back burner. Dallion had allocated a large number of dwarf civilians there, effectively turning them into large towns, but compared to Alliance, they couldnt be considered even satellites.

The gorgon and dwarf population also had misgivings regarding him becoming their noble. It didnt matter that he was engaged to Euryale, or that she had willingly given him control of the settlement,

many viewed him as a usurper. Dallion could sense the feelings emanating from them on a constant basis. A few music filled speeches had helped things stabilize, but that was a temporary measure.

No ships spotted so far. Veil appeared a step away from Dallion.

While Dallion had kept him in Sandstorm, the link between the domains allowed Veil to move between domains belonging to the same owner.

Ive moved the quarters about a bit. They should be fine for now. Hannah isnt particularly happy. Moving the entire fighting force here has created a soft belly. If someone attacks from behind

Thats what youre here for, Dallion replied, returning to the real world. The overseer did the shift with him. The Order will have our back. They cant afford to let me fall.

Dal, youve no idea what the Order really wants. For all you know, they might be working together with the emperor to get all enemy forces in one place so he can fire his rockets and get rid of you all.

That was an ominously realistic option. Dallion could see it happen. He wouldnt die, of course. Thanks to his domain powers, he could return to his domain in the capital while all of his settlements and everything between them was turned to glass.

Lets hope the Order doesnt let him.

Casting a flight spell, Dallion rose into the air. The city was forming quite well. Euryales initial planning was solid. Dallion had added to that, focusing on sea and air defenses. Few could tell by looking, but the city had a substantial underwater section. No one lived there, but any ships that approached would quickly learn they werent welcome when spikes of stone shot up through their hulls.

Gorgon soldiers covered the three-layer wall, hundreds of them equipped with heavy crossbows. The weapons were the dwarves contribution. With most of their warriors dead or captured, they had focused their efforts on crafting, which they did exceedingly well. All it took was a single advanced blueprint created by Dallion and Euryale, for them to copy it thousands of times without question.

Hows Eury? Veil asked.

Shes better.

Thats good, he said in a low voice, suggesting that wasnt the main topic of conversation. So, you can visit Sandstorm and Stone Circle for a bit.

Again? Dallion frowned. I was already there this morning.

Yes, and youll need to be there a lot more. Look, I get whats going on. Heck, I even like Eury. Everyone in the know does. Still, Sandstorm feels abandoned. They were the first that followed you here on a limb. Some left comfortable lives behind to fight nymphs in the wilderness because they believe in you. Now that millions have come to the shore, they feel like you dropped them like a rotten pear.

That was the last thing that Dallion intended, but he couldnt deny that from their perspective, it seemed that way.

Go there, use your music skill to say a few words, Veil continued. You said Eurys fine.

I said shes better.

Shes fine enough, Veil snapped. Im telling you that the people in Sandstorm arent. So, unless you want to start relying heavily on limiting echoes, youd better go there!

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Dallion turned around. His index finger was already splitting the air. Just as he was about to respond in a bout of anger, the words of his grandfather came back to him: it isnt easy forging a province. In Dallions mind, time slowed to a crawl.

Youve actually gone through this, old man,

he thought. Havent you? All the time pretending to be an old broken man, concerned for his daughter, yet you were a domain ruler.

Clearly, a man was ready to go through anything for his children. Maybe thats why he agreed to go back to the village; maybe that was why he had left control of everything to Aspion. When Dallion had appeared in the world, he saw them as two bitter enemies. Now, he knew that not only had they been childhood friends, but all their actions were to protect their families and, in a way, Dherma as a whole. There was no doubt that the former village chief had gone overboard, turning into a tyrant, but even he had started with the clear intention of keeping the settlement safe from the dangers of the outside world. His animosity towards Kraisten and all new awakened was because he feared that they might lead people to the same mistakes that had been made in the past.

Youre right, Dallion admitted after a while. Its time I did something better. His fingers danced in the air. Creating an intricate sphere spell.

Three interlocked circles of magic appeared, then broke up, each flying in a different direction. The largest stopped after less than a second positioning itself in the center of Alliances domain. The other two sped to Stone Circle and Sandstorm and did the same. Once that was done, Dallion summoned three clay cylinders and broke them; three aether echoes emerged.

Really? Veil gave Dallion an annoyed look. You cant even go yourself?

Thats not the point, Dallion said as all three of his echoes flew to reach the rings. If I was going to do either, I wouldnt have used three of them.

Minutes passed. Even with magic, it took a while for everything to be in place. The moment an echo entered a magic circle, it grew, turning into a semi-transparent rendition of Dallion. Some would say that was a cheap attempt to copy the emperors announcement from not too long ago. They would be right, but at the same time, such announcements worked.

Hi, all three aether Dallions said as he spoke.

The spell rings had made each echo large enough to be clearly visible from anywhere within the three settlements. More importantly, their voices were amplified so that everyone could hear them. He had taken special care to use his music skills in a subtle way so as not to be caught out, even by mages.

All of you know me, or have heard of me. Dallion made a deliberate pause. And right now, none of you are happy with what Im doing. Those of you who followed me feel this wasnt what you signed up for. I moved you to the edge of the known world only to become the target of the Azures. Those of you of the Alliance think that I dont deserve my position, that Im taking advantage of my fiancée's wounds to steal what should have been hers.

Emotions emanated from all inhabited locations. Dallion could feel the subdued anger at his words. That was goodhis point was to use a combination of magic and music skills to pull it out.

What was it? Any noble with magic and a few familiars could pretend to be a big deal, he continued. No one had said that particular phrase, but now many were convinced that someone had. Im that noble, and right now Im your noble.

Here we go, Dallion told himself.

Youve seen what I did at the vortex fields. Determination, strength and a sense of belonging were woven into his words. Youve heard what Ive done during the Academys disruption. Ive been a hunter, a mage, the Hero of Nerosal, who found the aetherbird during the last phoenix hunt. And right now, Im also your noble!

Dallion added the use of herbalism and zoology to the mix. Now, his words were affecting plants, animals, and guardians as well.

The fights never been between me and Eury, he continued, louder. It wasnt between me and you. And it definitely isnt between our three towns. You might have arrived in a different fashion, but youre here now! All of us have only one enemythe Azures. Thats why Ive focused on the city on the coast. Theres no doubt that theyre coming and here well make out stand!

Originally, Euryale had created the settlement as a temporary shelter while her forces scouted the area. The plan had been for them to move as far as possible inland, away from the water. With it becoming clear that the world is a globe, that was no longer the best option.

Here, we win! Dallion said, all of his three aether echoes raising a fist in the air.

Cheers erupted. The speech wasnt particularly special, but the cocktail of emotions he had instilled in the people had filled them with enough enthusiasm to last days.

Youre such a bastard, Veil whispered.

Whats the use of having music skills if I never take advantage of them? Dallion cast a spell, causing all three rings and aether echoes to vanish. It saves time. Right now, thats what we dont have. Let me know if things get bad again.

Sure. Veil sunk into the ground.

Dallion spent a few more minutes in the air to confirm that the effect was still present, then went back to Euryale. The gorgons wounds needed a lot of work before they were fully healed.

For days, he kept removing the strands of magic one by one from her flesh, healing it after each extraction. While he did, they would talk about everything and nothing: the present situation, nostalgic moments of the past, what could have been, what could be.

Days passed. The city continued to grow and fortify. Flights of furies criss-crossed the sky, scouting the area for any enemy ships. The situation remained tense, though the bog of resentment was gone. Euryale, too, slowly improved, though she remained far from her previous form. Thankfully, the mental doubt and pain had managed to evaporate a lot faster.

I'll go outside today, she said, putting on her shirt.

You still need a few more days. No need to rush it.

It's already been too long. People need to see me. You have a handful of nobles and only two domain rulers. If one of us is out of commission, morale will fall.

That was true, yet Dallion remained hesitant. His mind was already coming up with a dozen explanations and excuses why it would be better if she took it easy one more day, when suddenly Veil emerged in the room.

Sorry, lovebirds, we have a problem he began.

They're here, Dallion interrupted.

Yes. Veil nodded. A fury group spotted lots of ships coming this way.

Dallion turned towards Eury.

We knew they'd send their forces, she said. We're lucky. If they are ships, it means they've sent humans.

Very lucky. Dallion forced the words out of his mouth. Tell the furies to get back here and share all the info they have.

They're dead, Veil said. There were a few mages aboard.

That was unpleasant. Magic enemies always tended to create a mess.

I'll face them, Dallion said. Eury, you stay here in case something happens.

Dal. The gorgon walked up to him and gently slid her hand along his right cheek. Not on your life. I've seen a lot more battles. We wait for them to get near, then face them together.

Chapter 878: The Puppeteer's Strings

Thick layers of water covered the hulls of the ships as they approached. Dallion had used one of his aether echoes to fly ahead and cast a ray of destruction before they came into view, but to little effect. Walls of water had risen up the moment the beam had emerged, decreasing its strength to such a degree that by the time it hit the flagship, it barely caused a mark.

In turn, the flagship had launched a wave of water projectiles at the echo. Defending against them proved simple, but it gave Dallion a taste of what was to come. No wonder the Alliance had lost: the Azures relied heavily on magic and after recent events, there wasn't a lot anyone could do to counter them. The only defense against a mage, other than overwhelming numbers, was another mage; that or a domain ruler.

A line of water rose up from the front ship, heading straight for Alliance's wall. Aether barriers emerged only to be shattered like glass. Water mercilessly continued forward, piercing through, until it slammed into the reinforced granite wall. Thankfully, that was all it did.

Theyre testing you, Euryale said. They did the same before wiping us out.

Dallion nodded. Both sides had done their obligatory show of strength and neither had the upper hand. With that, the ante was raised.

Their hulls are covered in water golems, Gleam told Dallion in his realm.

The shardfly had flown up in the sky, using illusion to mask itself as a cloud. As vicious and powerful as it was, even it wouldnt be able to win the battle alone. After all, a dragon had already tried that and clearly failed.

When they get near, the golems will be the first to charge, Gleam added. Also, dont trust their numbers. Most of the fleet is hiding beneath illusion spells.

How many? Dallion asked.

Three-quarters. Maybe four fifths. Its difficult to tell from this distance.

Not good. According to the fury scouts, over a hundred ships had been spotted. If Gleam was to be believed, that put the total number at five hundred at least.

Good job, Gleam. Keep observing. At some point, I might tell you to join in.

You better.

Whats the matter? Several clusters of Euryales snakes turned to Dallion.

Theres a lot more of them than meets the eye, Dallion replied. Most of the fleet is invisible, and there are water golems hiding on the ships. How did you manage to fight them off last time?

We didnt. We caused most of their losses once they went inland. Everything on the coast was lost. The gorgon adjusted her sun gold armor. Despite Dallions treatment, the wounds still caused her a sizable amount of pain. Nymphs were leading the charge back then.

A wedge towards the empire, Dallion thought. As long as he dealt with the water golems and the mages aboard, victory was within reach. That didnt mean it would be easy.

Upon reaching the edge of the citys domain, the flagship stopped. The smaller ships followed. The number of magic threads throughout each of them was impressive, making them glow bright purple.

I still think I should inform the emperor, dear boy, Adzorg complained. Due to necessity, Dallion had removed his blocking ring, but also made the old mage give a Moon vow that he wouldnt share anything he knew of the situation to anyone. He could destroy the fleet in minutes.

And us along with it, Dallion thought.

The aether echo flew towards the ship, performing a series of line and point attacks with the aim of provoking the enemies into doing something. Lines of destruction split the massive wall of water that emerged, attempting to cut through. No matter the number, though, none of them was able to pass the middle.

Harp? Dallion asked. Whats special about the water?

Normally, a line attack was capable of slicing through cliffs. To have it stopped, there had to be magic in play and more.

The harpsisword guardian didnt respond. The invaders, though, did. Cones of water emerged from the wall, darting at the echo. The aether-Dallion split into fifty instances as he pulled back. Using guard and attack skills, he slashed at several of the water cones, to no result. Upon getting hit, they splintered into thousands of water needles, flying in all directions. An aether sphere emerged, at which point the real goal of the attack became apparent.

Theyre symbols, Dallion said, although too late for his echo to take advantage.

Magic symbols formed around the aether sphere, connecting to one another with threads of water. A massive explosion followed. Water splashed in all directions. The Azure fleet was forced slightly back as the sea rippled beneath them. Meanwhile, several waves slammed into the outer wall of the city. When the tons of water fell back into the sea, the echo was gone.

Did they do that when you fought them? he turned to Eury.

No, she replied in a tone suggesting that they did far worse things.

Guess theres no going around it, he summoned his harpsisword and aura blade. Ill have to go there.

Instantly, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Dont. The tone was hard, but at the same time Dallion felt it like a plea.

Itll be fine, he lied, placing his hand on hers. I have something in mind.

The gorgon loosened her grip, allowing her hand to slide off. Dallion nodded with a smile, then floated up. For the last few days. He had been devising a plan just for this occasionone he hadnt even shared with the gorgon. Now it was time to execute it.

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Get ready, he said within his domain.

No hostile action took place as Dallion flew to the edge of his domain. As he got closer, more and more enemy ships appeared, shedding off their illusion of invisibility. Whoever was leading the force knew that such spells would achieve nothing, so had ventured to intimidate as many of Dallions forces as possible. Thousands of troops moved about the decks, preparing massive ballistas to fire. The magic threads within the bolts made it clear that they would do more than physical damage to their target.

Music weapons? Dallion asked.

Could be, Vihrogon said hesitantly. Harp would know better.

Dallion could feel the fear and reluctance emanating from the nymph. They were markedly stronger than before and still growing.

Whats going on, Harp? he asked. Under different circumstances, he would have ventured into his awakening realm to have a conversation on the matter. When dealing with such enemies, he couldnt afford any such luxuries even a moments lack of concentration could prove too much.

If musics what you want. Dallion waved his aura sword, leaving spell circles in the air. He then released it, grabbing his harpsisword with both hands.

The aura sword floated in the air as Dallion combined attack and music skills.

Spark, he played the first chord.

Glowing threads of music erupted from the harpsisword, flying in all directions. Several clusters burned through the barrier of water as if it were made of wax. Apparently, it was magic, after all.

Increasing the pace, Dallion started singing, launching a second set of threads forward. All nearby ships targeted him with their ballistas. Taking the magic into account, they had enough firepower to create a crater on the ocean floor. And still, none of them actually fired.

What are you waiting for? Dallion kept playing.

The sound of music had effectively drilled through the ships protection, making it all the way to the hull itself. Dallion could see scarring appear on the polished wood.

An idea emerged, one so insanely dangerous that no one would even consider it. No logical person would even attempt such a course of action, but that meant it would come with the element of surprise.

Time stopped. All of Dallions mind trait focused on the possible outcome. He couldnt use aether echoes or combat splitting doing so would warn the enemies of his intentions. The only way to succeed was to risk it all, and in one moment of certainty, Dallion did just that.

Lux! He ordered.

Blue flames enveloped Dallion, then propelled him forward as fast as a bullet. Dozens of ballista bolts launched from the nearby ships, already too late to change the outcome.

Stop! Dallion said.

With the created inertia, Dallion was headed for the straight mast. Not in the least bit concerned, he changed the way he was holding the harpsisword, then did a vertical line slash to deal with the issue.

A pair of swords parried his attack, stopping the line of destruction before it could happen.

What? Dallion burst into instances, ordering Lux to pull back.

His opponent split in just as many, following up with a counterattack of his own. An exchange of blows followed, faster than the eye could follow.

Of course it would be you, Dallion thought, recognizing his opponent. It was the nymph that had puppeted Phoil, now having Grym Dreuds bodyguard as a puppet. The two had clashed twice before, and ended in a draw both times.

Rather, the last time couldn't be called a draw. Despite what the other claimed, Dallion had the impression he was allowed to win.

There won't be a stalemate this time! The aura sword swooped in from behind, creating a trail of spell circles in its wake.

Meanwhile, Dallion pressed on with a multi-attack in each instance.

Entangle him! He ethered the item guardians of his enemy's clothes.

In two hundred and forty-seven of the instances, nothing happened. But in three, the items responded. The man's sleeves moved just enough to catch the hilt of the left blade he was holding. It was an innocent action, slowing him down fractions of a second, but in the world of high-level awakened that was more than enough.

Got you! Dallion forced that reality to become reality, piercing the back of his enemy's hand. Blood erupted with incredible intensity.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

A red rectangle emerged.

Huh? Dallion blinked. This wasn't supposed to appear in the real world.

Taking advantage of his hesitation, the Azure quickly retreated down the deck. Dallion was just about to follow when a blur emerged twenty feet away.

So, you've grown a bit, the blood took form. Once it did, a sensation of terror surrounded Dallion.

Grym, he said, summoning the aura blade. The weapon instantly returned to him, where it was grabbed in the air.

Using your famed healing firebird, the leader of the alliance continued. Dallion had expected their encounter ever since the battle within the personal realm of Grym's brother. He had perfectly expected it to be at least as challenging as his fight against the Star. What he couldn't have predicted was that the person who hated his guts would appear dressed in a common outfit that nobles used for fencing practice.

Grym wore no armor. He didn't have any protective spells, artifacts, familiars, or impressive weapons. He stood on the deck, in a simple shirt of gray pearl-thread, looking down at Dallion with a cold sense of superiority.

Won't your shardfly join in? he asked. Or are you using her to look at my fleet? Well, let me make it easy for you.

On cue, ships appeared in the sea. There were as many as Gleam had suggested, but even so, seeing them pop up in groups of three and four was highly intimidating.

Better? Grym smiled.

You're not Grym, Dallion said. Who are you?

Finally catching on? Id compliment you, if you werent half a year too late.

Hes a puppet, boss! Lux chirped. Theres a nymph inside!

Dallion felt his blood run cold. He should have seen this. Someone should have seen it.

The Azures didnt summon you back from banishment, he said. You summoned yourself back.

Magic is the trait of exceptions. Grym smirked. Having the Purple Moon as patron of our race also helped.

So, who are you, really?

Who do you think?

Before Dallion could answer, the wave of sheer terror surrounding him erupted.

Im not going back! Harps scream ripped the air, making everyones ears in a one-mile radius hurt. The terror emanating from the weapon was so strong that it had become visible like a pillar of blue light.

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Nymph Capital Sorgente, Nymphs Era

Chapter 879: Harp's Story

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Nymph Capital Sorgente, Nymphs Era

Water slashed through water as merciless as ice. Two more water golems lost their cores, splashing formlessly to the floor.

That makes seven, Giaccia thought as she twisted in the air.

Three more and she would have been done. Given what she had gone through so far, that didnt seem much of a challenge, but she wanted to manage in under three minutes. If she did that, shed beat her uncles record, which would make her the greatest awakened prodigy in the world.

Sensing her desire, the remaining water golems pulled away from the center of the hall. Two launched water projectiles from two sides, while the third slid up the wall and onto the ceiling. A sneaky approach, but not good enough to stop Giaccia.

Taking full control of the surrounding water, she created a dozen copies of herself, sending them in all directions. The constructs couldnt move further than twenty feet from her, but they didnt have to. The nymph never intended to use them for attacking.

Grabbing a chunk of water, she rushed at the golem on the wall. All of her copies created weapons out of water, countering the attacks of the other two constructs. Liquid projectiles slammed into one another, bursting into fine spray.

The third golem erected several walls of water in front of it, only making Giaccias task easier.

Spark,

the nymph thought as she let out a high-pitched cry. It was far less elegant than the songs she usually used in battle, but right now, she was in a hurry.

Strands of music, infused with the power of the Moons, spread out, piercing through the water barrier, then into the golem itself. Moments later, the being lost its consistency.

Eight! The nymph turned around.

Her mentors and instructors had taught her that a clear plan was the key to winning every battle. Some of them had even gone so far as to suggest that there was nothing wrong in combat splitting on occasion. It was the sure thing to do the safe things to do. Right now, it was also the wrong thing to do.

Directing all of her copies to the side, Giaccia charged on towards the closest of the two water golems. With nothing left to stop them, hundreds of projectiles flew straight at her, just as she wanted.

Slide, twist, twist, leap, the nymph said mentally, as she set on to avoid the water drops. Most people would find it impossible, but she was smart enough to see beyond space, considering time as a factor as well. As long as she evaded the first half dozen with her guard skills, the rest wouldn't reach her immediately.

While it would have been a lot easier to rely on awakening markers, she had enough experience to see all available options. The way things were arranged, there were four of them. Two made any follow-up nearly impossible, which made her pick one of the remaining.

The moment the first guard series was complete, the remaining projectiles slowed down. Giaccia immediately continued with the second, already thinking ten moves ahead. A path emerged in her mind, showing her exactly where and how she had to go.

With each next sequence, the world became slower and slower, until finally it froze still. This was probably the most difficult part of the exercises. While the bonuses of several consecutive guard sequences provided an overwhelming advantage, they came with a serious flaw. Most awakened tended to take advantage of the time freeze to stop and relax, possibly consider their future moves in great detail. Unless it was for a fatal blow, such a pause tended to make them vulnerable the moment time returned to normal.

Plunging forward head first, Giaccia spun in the air, passing through the motionless drops of water, then used her natural magic ability to create a water tendril that flew right at the golem's core. Magic threads extended within, destroying the connections that maintained the water entity.

Nine.

Inertia kept the nymph going forward. Only one remained. All remaining water copies maintained the wall between her and the enemy, blocking every attack and even getting some of their own projectiles to wound the golem.

From here on, it was a simple matter of keeping up the pressure. Giaccia didn't hesitate, sprinting right at it. The intensity of attacks increased to such a point that the copies had destroyed the water golem, fifty feet before she could reach it.

Ten. A victorious smile appeared on the nymphs face. Confident with her success, she waited for the water walls to flow into the floor. As they did, a new section became visible in the hall the throne section where dozens of nobles stood and sat, including Giaccias own parents.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

Almost a minute to spare, a tall nymph standing by the throne said with a semi-bored expression. Would have been faster if youd used some magic.

The comment felt like a dagger in the back. The person who had spoken was the rulers brother, and Giaccias uncle. Referred to as the old prodigy he had held the record for thirty-seven years. Of course, he had been Giaccias age when he had initially set it. Everyone knew he had become a lot stronger now, both in combat and magic something she mostly lacked.

Still a fitting performance for an heir, he added, turning to the king.

Needlessly reckless, Queen Assenia Giaccias mothersaid, backing her brother. You didnt have to rush to kill them as quickly as possible.

If I hadnt, I wouldnt have broken uncles record, Mother, Giaccia said with just enough charm to make the comment acceptable.

Two groups of servants were on their way to her, but were quickly stopped by a wave of her hand. They were not going to ruin her moment.

Confidently marching forward, behind her, statues, paintings, and pieces of furniture emerged from the watery floor, transforming the hall into a throne room. Reaching the royal flight of stairs, Giaccia fell down to one knee.

This was the moment she was hoping for the day she would be officially acknowledged by her father.

You passed your decifida, King Cial said. Impressive without a doubt, but that still doesnt make you heir.

Sudden silence filled the room. There was no doubt in Giaccias mind that she wouldnt be heir. Her brother, although in poor physical condition, had that honor.

In recognition of your achievement, I grant you the title royal princess, he waved his hand, going through the motions. You may rise.

Giaccia gritted her teeth. She had suspected she might get a similar type of response, though still expected to see a spark of emotion in the eyes of her family. That was one of the many things she found wrong in the Icestream kingdom they had grown cold and complacent, just as their name. All their history books spoke of times when the kingdom was among the few who had withstood the copyette attempt to take over the world. Some claimed that they were instrumental in the banished races downfall. If true, all that strength and determination had been squandered throughout the generations until there was nothing left.

Thank you, Father. The nymph stood up. Id like your permission to share the news with my brother.

Do as you like, the king openly yawned.

Servants rushed onto the scene, bringing refreshments to the nobles present. Dancing shapes of water emerged in the empty hall entertainment for the bored classes. Giaccia clenched her fists. There was a time when she found the performances amusing. That was before she saw how fake they were. The magnificent displays of dancing and singing illustrated scenes of a glorious past that the kingdom seemed destined never to have again.

Walking as quickly as etiquette allowed, Giaccia left the throne room, returning to her quarters. Initially, she had thought about telling her brother of her achievement, but now she was no longer sure. The heir was too smart for his own good, virtually chained to a bed due to his disastrous health. Lately, two high-level mages had to be constantly by his side, constantly maintaining him with healing spells. Officially, he was said to be improving, but everyone knew that to be a lie. What they didn't know was how ill he really was.

Congratulations, a faint voice in the corridor said.

Giaccia turned around. A young nymph, no older than fourteen, stood there. The design of her water clothes clearly depicted her as a member of the royal family, although there was no tiara on her head. The child looked so out of place one could say that she was a complete stranger brought there for the occasion. The shyness and uncertainty visible in her face did nothing to refute the impression.

You fought really well, the young nymph added, timidly approaching. I really enjoyed it.

Thanks, Tia. Giaccia smiled.

The Icestream royal family had three children, and all of them unfit. Despite her prodigious skills, Giaccia was limited when it came to magic and also extremely slow to heal the slightest wound. Her brother was virtually bedridden. As for her younger sister the perfectly healthy body housed a soul far weaker than anyone else. Although in her late teenage years, Tiallia had the appearance of a fourteen-year-old and the character of a seven-year-old. Timid and unconfident to the extreme, she had never awakened. At this point, everyone had completely given up hope, viewing her as a decoration rather than an actual person.

I'm sure you'll do just as well when your time comes. Giaccia made an attempt to encourage her.

You her sister said, looking down at the floor. You should become heir.

The statement was remarkable, almost causing Giaccia to take a step back. It wasn't so much what the young nymph was saying, but that she had uttered it at all. Of the entire court, she was the last person to voice an opinion on anything, and yet she had made the most controversial one there was.

Brothers smart, but he'll never do what you could. Even father knows it.

Father will never allow someone limited in magic to take the throne, Giaccia sighed. She had accepted that long ago. All she wanted was a bit of recognition, yet even that was too much to hope for. You're more likely to claim it than me. If only you were a bit more assertive.

If I do, I'll give it to you.

Lately, there wasn't much that could make Giaccia smile. This definitely was one of those few instances. It was more the absurdity of the situation that made her do so. The broken encouraging the broken. One could almost say that the Moons had cursed the Icestream family, splitting their perfect child into three parts. The first had an unparalleled mind, the second had unmatched skills and determination, and the third had a flawless body, but no desire to use it.

It's fine. Giaccia went up to her sister and gave her a hug. It was an awkward experience, although she could sense how happy that made Tiallia feel. Apart from everything else, Tia was starved for emotion. We don't need the throne to be happy. Look at father, she added with a snide chuckle. He's king, and he's never happy. All we need to do is find other things that would bring us joy.

No, the other whispered. You will have the throne. Because you deserve it.

If anyone else had said that, Giaccia might have been worried. There was no way she would do anything stupid. Even if she wanted to, there were far too many guards accompanying the heir at all times.

Tia. Giaccia looked her sister in the eyes. No one wants the throne. At the end of the day, all we want is for those we consider close to tell us we've done well.

I know. And that's why you deserve it. You'll make sure the kingdom does well, just as you've taken care of me.

Chapter 880: Harp's Story - Futility

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Nymph Capital Sorgente, Nymphs Era

Clouds floated gently above the ocean, colored bright orange in the sunset. Most would find them calming, some might even call them beautiful, but Giaccia knew all too well that they were neither.

Now! she whispered, swimming up to the surface.

Dozens of nymph soldiers followed, combat splitting as they did. Hundreds of water tendrils shot up towards the sky. Moments later, they were sliced into pieces by just as many air currents originating from the clouds.

Scavengers, Giaccia thought. That was good. Anyone stronger would have come with battle mages.

What are their levels? Giaccia asked in her awakened realm, focusing on the largest of the clouds. If she managed to destroy that, the rest would be easy to follow.

Twenty-three, the echo of the group's mage replied. Twenty-three to thirty, mostly.

Third graders? That was low, even for scavengers. That explained why they had tried to sneak their way through Icestream territory, as well as why they were so bad at it. Any children?

None that I can see. All of them are awakened.

That settled it. It was impossible for a group of awakened to gather by accident.

Hundreds of nymphs broke through the watery surface, attacking at the invaders. They were instantly met with a rain of air bolts and arrows.

Giaccia paid no notice, letting out three line strikes through the larger clouds. The thread of destruction sliced through, filling the air with a horrifying scream; a cloud creature had just died.

Focus on the clouds! Giaccia ordered. Thats

Wait! The mage echo shouted within her realm. Theres a thunder fury with them!

A web of lightning emerged, raining down on the nymph attackers. Dozens were scorched on the spot, their bodies transforming into charred remains. Dozens more were wounded to the point of uselessness.

Magic symbols covered Giaccias skin. It wasnt her doing it, but the echo of the mage within her realm. Both knew that against such an enemy, it would hardly matter. Lightning was natural magic of a higher order. It would take a mage of over eighty to create a spell to adequately counter it, and right now, all mages of that caliber were tending to the royal heir.

More lightning strikes followed; far smaller than before, they targeted individual nymph groups. Finding themselves suddenly outmatched, most of the nymphs quickly fled back into the water. Giaccia didnt.

You mustnt stay up there,

the mages echo insisted. *They arent looking for a fight. If we let them through, they wont follow.*

If we cant stop this group, we wont be able to stop the rest.

Running on the oceans surface, Giaccia sprinted in the direction of the lightning source. The remaining clouds made it difficult to see, but based on the bolts position, she got a good idea.

Line attacks rained up on her, slicing the ocean surface as if it were a wax. The furies who had been losing a moment ago, now took advantage of the situation, focusing on any enemy they could see. At the moment, that was less than a handful.

How many are we? Giaccia asked the mages echo.

On the surface? Five.

How good are the other three?

Having no time to waste on the lesser opponents, she performed a point attack in the direction of the cloud above her, then spun her wrist. A spiral of destruction formed, combining the devastating features of point and line attacks.

A fair distance away, an aether sphere appeared, surrounding another of the nymphs. It was good to know that the company mage had remained in the fight. Giaccia caught sight of another nymphan old veteran who had been dealing with skirmishers for decades. His magic was low, allowing him to only cover his skin with a thin layer of magic threads.

Pincer attack, the soldier gestured, forcing the water beneath his feet to rise like a tower launching him up in the sky. Half a dozen water copies followed.

Giaccia immediately did the same.

Where are you? She split into three instances, searching for the thunder fury.

Droplets of water shot out in all directions. Even if the fury was using something to become invisible, the spray of water would reveal it.

Several new bolts of lightning gained form, targeting both attackers. Half of the veterans water copies were obliterated.

Another bolt flew by Giaccias, though it wasnt remotely as threatening. The enemys aim didnt seem to be all that good at close distances.

Two more nymphs shot up from the ocean, converging on the target. Aware of the overall situation, they launched as many water projectiles as they could handle. They werent the only ones. All and any remaining furies quickly flew in that direction as well. This was the key point of the battle: either the nymphs would manage to fend off the attack, or theyd lose.

Found him! The mages echo said in her realm. The gap in the spray.

It took a fraction of a second for her to see what he was referring to. As water and air clashed, a silhouette of emptiness briefly formed in the distance. That was where the thunder fury was hiding just below what remained of a cloud cluster.

Boost me there, Giaccia ordered.

Thats a bad idea. With all those clouds, theres

Do it!

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Magic patterns formed on Giaccias back and legs. A new force emerged, propelling her forward like a slingshot.

The furys reflexes were likely on par with hers since he responded by launching a web of lightning her way. Deep inside, Giaccia smiled. The challenge of combat had swept away the cobwebs and mold that life in the capital had stuck to her. In this moment, she felt alive, eager for the fight, eager for the kill.

There was no point in relying on any guard skills now. Taking full advantage of her training, Giaccia combined acrobatic and attack skills, targeting the lightning itself.

Force met magic. That alone wasnt enough to negate the enemy's spell, but when combined with a spiral strike, she was able to swirl all the lightning bolts, creating a tunnel of safety through them.

My turn to counterattack. She followed up with dozens of point strikes.

Clouds exploded, shredding into nothingness as they were pushed away from the target. The figure of a small fury formed, its black skin leaving no doubt whether he was the lightning caster. Now, Giaccia could see him for the first time.

The fury was old, far older than she would have expected. No doubt he was experienced, continuing to cast lightning while at the same time surrounding himself with air currents in a desperate attempt to deflect Giaccias attacks. In another time, he might have been a commander, possibly even a general. Now, he was nothing but the scavenger, sneaking through Icestream territory.

Careful! The mage echo shouted as the nymph veteran was struck in the funder furys latest attack. He had taken the brunt of the attacks, providing Giaccias an opening and she intended not to waste it.

Continuing with piercing attacks, Giaccia reached the thunder fury. From this distance, the air currents were so thick, that the magic within them had created a semi-transparent layer of purple.

The fury turned around. In that single moment, both attacker and attacked knew that only one of them would survive. The difference was that Giaccia had no doubt as to who the survivor would be.

Spark, she said out loud.

Her blade danced through the air. Faster than the eye could see, it sliced through the gaps of the air currents, carving them out like threads from a ball of yarn. Before the thunder fury could commence his response, hundreds of them had snapped, creating a crack in the otherwise invulnerable shield. Yet, a crack was enough.

Splitting into four instances, Giaccia thrust her rapier forward. The tip of the blade entered the inside of the air bubble, releasing the raw power of a point attack, along with a jet of water.

Sparks of lightning had just emerged, but it was already too late. The moment the jet hit the furys chest, he exploded in a burst of blood and bones. No longer under control, the air currents untangled, pushing Giaccia back, and scattering the furys remains within miles.

I won, Giaccia told herself.

Her heart was beating like crazy, eager to continue the fight. Right now, she felt like she could fight the world itself, yet there was no one left to present a challenge. At the sight of their leaders death, the remaining furies stopped their attack, turning around to flee in all directions. They wouldnt get anywhere. The surviving nymphs that had avoided the thunder battle were already emerging from the ocean again, ready to make up for their behavior. Theyd have no trouble mopping up the remains.

Leaving gravity to take its course, Giaccia relaxed as she fell down. Twenty feet from the surface, the water rose up, gently meeting her fall.

Well done again, the mage floated next to her. The protective aether bubble was gone, but he still used a flight spell to remain in the air. You didnt have to take him down yourself. We would have managed.

Maybe, maybe not. Why didnt you spot the thunder fury? she asked.

Magic is an art. There was no reason to think there would be one hiding among scavengers. The more important question is, why was he here to begin with?

He was experienced. I saw that much.

A thunder soldier? The mage rubbed his chin. They didn't look like an attack force. I mean, look at them.

That much was true.

Maybe troubles brewing east again? he suggested.

After the collapse of the copyette empire and the banishment of their race, the east continent had become a mess. Gorgons, dwarfs, and dryads were scattered among small kingdoms, surrounded by a wilderness of monsters. Even the furies had avoided the area.

Giaccia hated the isolationist policy of her father. As far as king Cial was concerned, out of sight out of mind was the greatest form of wisdom there was. In his view, Icestream had no reason to get involved in land affairs and that's all there was to it.

If we had captured the thunder fury alive, maybe we could have asked him. The mage quickly caught the warning glance coming from Giaccia. Maybe the scavengers would know. Well just ask them.

Princess Giaccia!

a servant's echo said from her realm. *You must return to the capital!*

It had been Giaccia's idea to invite the echoes of a few trusted servants into her realm. That way, she could remain up to date with what was going on without having to be there. Up till now she'd mostly heard useless gossiping uncles' inspirations to inherit the throne, her brother getting worse or better, depending on the day but never anything spectacularly urgent. This time, it was different; she could hear the panic in the echo's voice.

What happened? Giaccia asked.

Your sister. She went to the awakening temple and

Did father force her? Giaccia interrupted.

It had been years since Tiallia's last awakening attempt. The last ones had been exceptionally taxing, sapping all her strength, though still without result. For that reason, it was decided that no further attempts would be made.

No, princess. She went there on her own and has been unconscious ever since.

Unconscious?! Fear and anger flashed in Giaccia's eyes.

Without another word, she turned to the mage, but he was already ahead of her. Several complex spell patterns had appeared in the water beneath them, forming a portal outline.

Tell me what's happened, he said, continuing with the spell. I'll take care of things here.

Giaccia didn't nod, her attention entirely focused on the forming portal. Once it was complete, she leaped in. Purple exploded around her, as if she'd splashed into a pool of aether. When it cleared, moments later, she was back in the Galateas square within the capital. A gigantic statue of the Purple Moon stared down at her, made entirely of Moonstone. Any mage attuned with it could

instantly create a portal to there; if Giaccia had an adequate magic level, she could as well. That wasn't her concern right now. Dashing through the square, she rushed to the awakening temple.

A small crowd had already gathered by the time she had arrived. Hundreds of nymphs of various ages were there, eager to find out what was going on. The whispers in the air spoke of a member of the royal family dying. Most speculated that it was Prince Astrea. Others claimed it to have been Princess Tiallia or even Princess Giaccia herself.

Using her awakening skills to weave through the crowd, Giaccia reached the cordon of guards at the entrance.

Move aside, she said with the authority of a royal.

Feeling the weight of her presence, the soldier's body instantly moved to the side, before his conscious mind could even register what had happened.

Pushing past, Giaccia rushed into the temple.

A long corridor continued for a hundred feet, splitting into three. Each section had its own awakening altar. Following the trail of guards, it was clear which one Giaccia had to follow.

You can't go there, a nymph dressed in the gold and purple attire of a royal mage said.

Giaccia ignored him, rushing through the people like a needle through cloth.

Tia! Giaccia shouted as she entered the altar room.

Three people were present there: two royal mages and her sister lying on the floor. To her partial relief, her sister appeared to be breathing.

What happened? Giaccia went to the unconscious princess. Who allowed this?

She came here herself, highness, one of the mages said, his voice dripping with annoyance. She convinced her guards that she just wanted to pray for her brother's health.

You silly girl!

Tiallia knew better than anyone else the state of the prince. Bishops from the Order of the Seven Moons had spent years praying for the same, with no result. The only reason she would come here was to do something stupid such as this. The nymph saw herself as a burden, so she must have forced herself to make one more attempt at awakening.

Tia Giaccia put her hand on her sister's cheek. Why did you do this? You know you can't fight fate.

When the Moons decided something, nothing in the world could change their mind. After what the Star and the copyettes had attempted, there were many who didn't blame them.

Will she live? Giaccia looked at the nearest mage.

She's breathing, he replied. As far as I can tell, she's healthy. When dealing with Moon matters, one can never be

Suddenly, Tiallia opened her eyes. She sat up, looking around the room. Seconds felt like hours. No one had the mental capacity to react to what had happened, staring at her as if she were out of this world.

Tia? Giaccia asked. You awakened?

Yes, the other replied, looking Giaccia straight in the eyes, seeking for answers there. Yes, I awakened.