

Leveling up 901

Chapter 901: The One Waiting

By evening, sightings of dragons largely diminished. The lesser members of the Twelve Suns had covered a considerable area, though so far none had come across the real dragon. According to Abba, Pierce and his group had stumbled on another ruin fragment, though the dragons within it were no different from the batch theyd faced.

Do we keep searching after dark? Tors voiced the question only a sheltered would ask. At his level, he could easily stay awake for over a week, yet the capital had imposed different expectations.

The Count openly scoffed at the question, while Astra discreetly looked away.

Well take a short break, Abba said. Get some rest in your realm.

Im not tired, Tors went on the defensive. Im just not sure itll be efficient. They see better than us and with only two Moons in the sky

Well take a short break, Abba repeated.

And hes fighting to become an archduke, Dallion thought, looking at his cousin. While archdukes remained nobles, they were constantly on guard; with as many enemies inside the province as outside, they had to be.

Descending steadily to the ground, he ended his flight spell and undid the safety threads. While Tors went on a tirade coming up with explanations to excuse his question, Dallion moved away from the main group. Soon enough, he was joined by Abba.

What do you think? the noble asked in a hushed voice.

Nothing much, Dallion replied. The Count has a lot more experience than me. Hell

I know what the Count thinks. Im asking you.

Dallion paused for a moment, then nodded.

My guess would be that the dragon nest is in the rest of the ruins, he said. Wherever they are. My guess is that something must have shattered the structure recently and the realm with it. Probably the recent vortex pillars.

And the void mist circles?

Im not sure, Dallion admitted. Its not like we have any other leads. Weve covered a tenth of the overall area and still no sign of the big one. At that speed, it might take us weeks to come upon the nestmonths if we have to search the wilderness between realms.

I didnt say I disagreed. Abba gave Dallion a tap on the back. Youre wrong about one thing. It wasnt a vortex that shattered the ruin, but the Shimmering Circle.

Alien did this?! Dallion was more astonished that the Alien had the strength to do anything of the sort.

You think he wouldnt?

Couldnt was a more likely explanation. Dallion remembered the archmage's indecision during the vortex fields battle. There was no way he could stand up to a dragon nest, even if the rest of the Circle were with him. Or maybe thats what Ablas was implying? Alien could have easily spotted the ruin from the sky. Its possible he even saw a dragon, or felt the presence of one. It wouldnt be a stretch to think that the mage would then cast a mass destruction spell, believing in his arrogance that it would be enough to deal with the issue. After that had failed, hed quickly flee the coward that he was and come up with a convenient lie to cover up as much of his blunder as he could.

On second thought, thats exactly the sort of shit that hed do, Dallion said after a while. What was he doing this far north, anyway?

Who knows? The important thing is that we find the temple.

It was at this point that Dallion understood what the duke was really asking. One thing separated them from everyone else in the empire they had the empathy trait. After having its nest attacked, the great dragon had likely used its magic to move it, hiding the ruin in the northern wilderness. Finding it would be next to impossible, even with magic. In this case, empathy was the grand exception. Thanks to it Dallion and Ablas could communicate with item guardians tens, maybe hundreds of miles away. The same could be said for plants, creatures, and even dragons.

Youre asking me to reach out to them, arent you? Dallion glanced at the other three members of the party. The discussion continued, with Tors heating up more and more. What makes you think I know the language?

The Alliance had a dragon, Ablas said. And now that youre married to its owner, so do you. Learn it, then teach me. The determination emanating from the noble was unmistakable. You dont think I took a break so Tors could rest, did you?

In all honesty, Dallion hadnt given Ablas so much credit. Being focused on the intricacies of so many other things, he had forgotten that anyone in the capital could be manipulative, and the charismatic, quiet people often tended to be the most manipulative of all.

Give me a minute. Dallion ventured into his personal realm.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The bleakness around him disappeared, replaced by the vibrant colors of his realm. The entire western part of the sky was bright orange as the sun was halfway behind the horizon. All seven Moons shone brightly above, as if waiting to see what move hed make.

You never taught me real magic, a voice said nearby.

Looking to the side, Dallion saw Ariel the echo who hed named protector of his realm. Despite having a laughably low level compared to his original, the echo had been taught quite a few useful skills and equipped with enough clay cylinders to stop a small army. That didnt make him any less concerned.

Not the best time, Dallion thought, and instantly regretted it. His echoes could instantly read his thoughts.

What real magic do you want? he added quickly, correcting himself.

Do you know anything that would stop Ablā from invading your realm? the echo asked. Or an awakened dragon?

Both concerns were valid, and the sad truth was that neither had a solution. No one had made a serious attempt to invade the realm in quite some time, but that didn't make it impossible. As the saying went, it only took one attempt and Dallion would lose everything he had achieved.

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Why worry about it now? Dallion asked.

Because someone has to be. You're fighting all your battles on the outside, so we must protect the inside. You've gathered a lot of powerful creatures and guardians, but what if they aren't enough?

Dallion spent a few seconds looking at his white-haired echo. It wouldn't be the first time Ariel had been disappointed in what he viewed as realm neglect, but this time there was more to it. Now, Dallion could see part of his own fears. They weren't necessarily directed towards the dragons, or even Ablā, but rather at what was to follow.

Come along. Dallion made his way towards the skill pillars of his realm.

A long time ago, back when he was still a single digit awakened, his acquired skills couldn't even cover a tenth of a wall. They had grown so much since then that twelve massive pillars were needed to contain them all. Framed and labeled, they glittered upon the hard surface of colored marble. Between them, a massive blue rectangle floated, perpetually turned towards Dallion.

YOU ARE LEVEL 127

BODY: 104

MIND: 104

REACTION: 93

PERCEPTION: 100

EMPATHY: 83

MAGIC: 115

SKILLS

- GUARD: 100

- ATTACK: 100

- ACROBATICS: 100

- ATHLETICS: 100

- FORGING: 100

- SCHOLAR: 100

- ARTS: 100

- CARVING: 100

- **MUSIC: 100**

- **ZOOLOGY: 100**

- **HERBALISM: 100**

- **SPELLCRAFT: 100**

Which one do you want? Dallion asked, looking at the skill frames.

Magic forging, Ariel replied without hesitation. That way I could make rockets.

A very peculiar choice, but also impossible. While the skill was part of the forging group, it also required a high magic trait, which the echo didnt have. The notion, however, gave Dallion an idea. The instant it formed in his mind, Ariels eyes widened.

Are you serious? the echo asked. Youre not just

Im serious. And not just for you.

I It was a rare sight to see Ariel speechless. I need to think about this.

Go ahead. Dallion turned around, looking at the top of the scholar pillar. He, too, had to do some thinking of his own.

Among the many frames, there was one with the image of a dragon. In the entire world, there were probably two people who knew the dragons own language. Abia had asked for there to be a third. In regards to the hunt, the request was a no brainer. Two empaths using their skills to locate the dragons nest were a lot better than one. At the same time, the noble would earn himself a rather valuable prize, while Dallion would gain nothing.

Any advice you can give me, Adzorg?

Yes, a voice said next to Dallion. Only, it belonged to Giaccia. Something is only valuable if it can be used. And right now, he cant use it for anything.

What if that changes?

It wont, because youll defeat the dragon.

The nymph didnt have to explain further. This was just another of the trials Dallion had to go through in order to reach his goal. The path to victory over Tamin and Tiallia lay through defeating a great dragon.

Thanks. The realm disappeared as Dallion returned to the twilight bleakness of the real world. His pupils took a fraction of a second to readjust, but that was enough for Abia to notice.

Got it? the noble asked.

Dallion nodded. The training took place in a neutral awakening realmthat of Abias relaxation ring. It was slightly awkward seeing the noble chase away a harem of exotic dancer echoes, but once that was over, the teaching process began. With both their scholar skills at their maximum, it took less than a day for Abia to learn dragon speech.

The noble was fully aware of the treasure he had been given, just as he found nothing wrong with taking it. Rank and title indeed came with their privileges.

Once the pair returned to the real world, the break was officially over. The party was split into two groups, each with their own empath. Astra and, unsurprisingly, Tors joined Abla, while the Count teamed up with Dallion. Each group went in its own direction, remaining in touch via echo rings. Then, the mental shouting began.

Hours passed. Night came and went and despite the level of Dallions empathy trait, his attempts were like the sound of a mosquito in the wilderness. All he could sense other than the item guardians that he and the Count were wearing was a vast nothing stretching in all directions.

They haven't found anything yet, the Count said as the second evening approached. Pierce came upon a large pack, but it wasn't the nest.

Pity. Dallion massaged his temples. Using empathy to call so far out was starting to stretch his limits.

Don't relax. The dragon might be a domain ruler.

Have you fought any domain ruler creatures?

Once. The creature won.

A rather unusual admission. The old hunter didn't seem the type that liked to share his failures.

What creature was it?

The Count looked back, but didn't answer.

Is that why you got your name erased? Dallion pushed on.

Are you really an Elazni? The other countered.

Some seem to think so. Others don't consider me part of this world.

The man shook his head, then started walking north east. After a few moments, Dallion joined him. Same as before, he split into a hundred instances, calling out to anything that could hear. For over an hour, there was no response. Just as the sun touched the horizon, a voice finally appeared.

Who are you? It was deep, powerful enough to fade away all of Dallions instances except one. Never before had he come across something capable of force splitting to such a degree. The notion made him tremble.

A dragon hunter, Dallion replied, using his magic skills to appear stronger than he was.

One of the magic toy-things, the voice said, amused. No, you're different. You have empathy. A lot of empathy.

Immediately, Dallion cast a web of illusion around him. Even if the creature had seen some of his traits, the hesitation suggested it hadn't seen all.

Trying to hide? The voice laughed. So amusing. Since the banishment of the dryads, theres almost no one left with the empathy trait. Maybe Ill spare you just because of that.

Dallion swallowed. Even from such a distance, the pressure exerted on him was considerable.

No, theres too much magic in you to let such a valuable morsel go. Ill tell you what Ill do. Since you found me, Ill give you till dawn to collect the rest of the toy soldiers and come here. If you dont, Ill come to you.

You sure are confident, Dallion held his ground.

Why shouldnt I be? Because you have the stench of a dragon whelp on you? Theres only one who could take me and hes not here, the creature said, almost in a purr. Ive raised my ruins. Its your move, dragon hunter. Ill be waiting.

Chapter 902: Ruin Infiltration

The ruins were as visible as a stem on an orange. Knowing the size of the column fragment it was expected they would be massive, though no one expected what they would find. The structure twenty times taller than wide towered above the wasteland like a massive gray spire. Time had left its mark, taking out entire chunks of an otherwise impressive cluster of interconnected buildings and temples. The complete lack of cracks suggested that the dragon had kept the realm in perfect condition. That wasnt the most terrifying thing, though. Dallion could see what any domain ruler could sense the dragons sphere of influence, stretching tens of miles from the ruins, like a venomous bubble.

While everyone avoided the topic, no one could understand how something this strong could have remained undetected all this time. Noble echoes were frantically discussing with people in the capital, going as far as the emperor himself.

I got nothing, Pierce said, his usually cheerful nature completely gone. You? he looked at Abba.

The emperor is still in the garden, the duke sighed. And has removed all the doors. No one can reach him until hes done changing the place again.

So, whats the play? the mage asked. Youre the highest ranking. You make the decision.

It was a difficult question to answer. There were two dozen inner sanctum members in total. Of them, less than half had the level to take on a beast of this nature. The desire to defeat such a powerful opponent was emanating from them like beacons in the night. At the same time, they were smart enough to exert some caution.

Just go for it, the Count said. Two mages and heavy support. Youll never get a better chance.

Always eager to go out in a blaze of glory, Pierce sighed. Hes right, though. If we dont deal with the problem during the pause in the war, the problem will grow.

Is there a chance it belongs to the Azures? Tors whispered.

Everyone turned his direction. For someone who thought himself such a bigshot in the capital, the messes he was making during this hunt went from bad to worse.

They appeared at the same time. Both the Academy and the Order have been exploring the wilderness for centuries and nothing. Now, suddenly we find a dragon nest just as the nymphs return to the world. It can't be a coincidence.

Dallion could see the faint threads of music that his relative was using while speaking. There was no need for that, though. Everyone was aware of the unusual coincidence, but above all, it didn't matter. They couldn't leave the dragon as it was.

We can't use prison items, Dallion said. The larger dragons are protected. I don't think blocker items will work, either. Something that old must have seen everything.

Not exactly.

Pierce reached into the air. Two aether circles formed, one within the other. The mages hand went in, then out again, holding a small box. The aether glow coming from it made Dallion look away. It was brighter than he was used to. In fact, the only things he could compare it to other than the emperor were Moonstones.

We've got something newer, Pierce opened the box.

Forty rings of light were inside, carefully arranged on dark blue velvet.

The second greatest treasure of our order. It was given as a gift to the emperor's grandfather by the Order of the Seven Moons.

The man took one out and placed it on his index finger. To Dallion's astonishment, the glow suddenly vanished; not only that, but the man's presence had also been erased. Looking at him felt like looking at a fake image: there were no emotions emanating from within, no magic threads, even all his item guardians had gone numb.

Dallion whistled a tune, merging his music skills with spark in an attempt to find a weak spot. The threads passed through Pierce, as if he were made of air.

Useful, aren't they? Astra stepped forward, taking one of them.

Indeed, they are, dear boy, Adzorg said from within his realm. Sorry I couldn't talk about it sooner. Moon vows, you understand. Although, I was under the impression they belonged to the emperor. As young Pierce said, they were a gift to the emperor's grandfather.

Absolute blocker items. Dallion had heard speculation about their existence back when he was at the Academy. Of course, the place was full of highly theoretical discussions. Before the betrayal, mages loved to speculate and tinker with powers that didn't belong to them.

What do you know about them? he asked.

Just that they work, the old mage said. My old teacher tried to replicate the effect, but couldn't. Whatever the Order of the Seven Moons had done, it's as close to Moon powers as one might get.

One by one, all members of the inner sanctum took a ring and put it on. What remained was kept in the wooden box, which was unsummoned back to where Pierce had taken it from. Dallion made an

attempt to memorize the spell used, but the amount of false symbols and magic countermeasures quickly made it clear that only one person had access to the treasure.

Ready? Abba asked.

Everyone nodded.

Pierce, fly us there, he ordered. And don't touch the moss.

Casting a three-sphere spell, Pierce blinked the entire group out of existence, then back in. The second time, they were a foot away from the base of the ruin. Many of the designs had an uncanny resemblance to those Dallion had seen within the aura swords world domain. Maybe the cluster of giant buildings was somehow related to them? Or maybe it was linked to the Eighth Moon?

AREA AWAKENING

Reality shifted. The sensation of abandonment smothered Dallion. There was nothing but darkness all around him no Moons, no stars, not even a single magic thread. Only thanks to his domain ruler abilities was he able to make out the shape of the surrounding environment.

You are in the land of [SPIRE]

The land's destiny cannot be fulfilled.

Spire again? Dallion wondered.

Clearly, it wasn't just the column base that had been torn off; the entire was part of a bigger whole. Just looking at the bleak insides gave Dallion the impression he was inside an item, or rather a paradox cube. Tunnels, roads, and structures all merged into one, forming a honeycomb of openings and buildings. The size of everything was enormous large enough for colossi to inhabit.

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No guardian? Tors whispered, starting at the blue rectangle.

That's not what it says, Dallion replied. The land's destiny can't be fulfilled. It doesn't mean that

COMBAT INITIATED

Waves of instances formed as everyone combat split, ready for battle. Dallion himself summoned all four of his main weapons, keeping two of them in the air with a quick spell.

Pierce also cast his unique blend of magic, creating twelve large balls of white flame that indiscriminately flew in all directions, fading all instances along the way.

Awakened markers appeared as people concentrated their skills. Even Tors was gripping his harpsword, playing a series of chords. The only thing missing was the enemy.

Where is it? someone asked.

The balls of fire had done a good job lighting up the immediate area, yet there didn't seem to be any creatures. The ceiling that passed for the sky in this realm held no surprises, either.

FATAL WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 75%

A red rectangle emerged above one of Dallions instances. It wasnt the only onea whole sea of rectangles formed, thinning the overall mass of instances by a quarter.

Illusion magic! Dallion shouted, slashing the air with his aura sword. It might be anything!

Dozens of magic circles formed, each pouring aether shards straight ahead. Several members of the group swiftly changed location to avoid getting hit. The remaining concentrated on the areas that were not covered by Dallions magic attacks.

Not worrying about the consequences, Abla did a spark infused three-sixty line slash.

Spark and magic were the only things that could pierce through an illusion that perfect. All that was needed was one hit for the entire creature to be revealed, or so the standard logic went.

Can you see him, Gleam? Dallion asked.

The whip blade floating beside him extended, slashing part of a nearby building. Unfortunately, nothing was revealed in the process. Even she didnt have the skill to see through their enemy.

FATAL WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 75%

More red rectangles emerged.

In his mind, Dallion compared the areas of attack. To achieve what it had, the dragon had to be moving and at considerable speed. There was no way someone wouldnt have noticed such an action, even if it had taken on the illusion of a structure. That left only one possibility.

Air! Dallion shouted. Its taken the form of an air current!

Thats why I hate fighting illusion creatures, the Count grumbled, sending out line attacks of his own. They always make it messy.

Threads and points of destruction flew in all directions, shattering every aspect of the realm.

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 93%

Blue rectangles emerged. Ignoring them, everyone continued, targeting every inch of the visible realm. Chunks of walls and ceiling fell on the battle-scarred floor. At this rate, it was just as possible that the realm would shatter, spitting everyone out, before the creature emerged. Then, it happened.

No one was able to say which strike led to the transformation. The only thing that mattered was that, among the ever-shifting sea of red rectangles, a purple one emerged.

MODERATE STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 150%

The rectangle quickly served as a beacon, directing all subsequent attacks towards it. Purple rectangles filled the space, spanning a distance of fifty feet. A moment later, the illusion broke.

An amber dragon, larger than any they had seen so far, gained form, flying above the main group. Scale-covered wings flapped together, blasting everyone back with a wave of air.

Gripping both swords, Dallion slashed back.

ATTACK NEGATED

You have sliced LUSTRAs attack in two.

Attack has no effect.

A rip formed, letting the air pass by Dallion without dealing any damage. Not everyone else was so lucky. Even with all their instances, three people had received moderate wounds.

Wheres your weak spot? Dallion tried to use his aura vision to glimpse at the dragons information rectangle.

A faint outline formed, but quickly faded away. Even in its current state, the dragon maintained a level of illusion, keeping its skills secret.

Go for the eyes! the Count shouted, throwing his sword right at the monsters head.

While impressive for a normal person, the attack was far too slow for an enemy of this caliber. Flapping its wings again, the creature twisted its neck to avoid the flying weapon. For a moment, it seemed as if it had succeeded, when the sword suddenly changed trajectory, flying right into the dragons giant eye. A loud clink followed, at which point the sword bounced off.

Damn it! The Count cursed. Theyll need softening.

Easy for you to say, Dallion whispered beneath his breath.

Sending a point attack at the beasts chin with his harpsisword, he twisted in the air, combining magic and athletic skills. Magic threads rushed through his aura sword as he followed up with a second attack, this time combining magic and music.

While weaker, the strands made their way to the dragons head, yet the moment they came into contact with the glistening scales, they snapped.

So much for subtlety, Dallion let go of his harpsisword and grabbed the hammer floating nearby. Your turn, Onda. He was just about to hurl it at the dragons head when Nox leaped out of him, fangs bared, flying straight at the dragons chest.

Eyes and fangs covered the cracklings entire body, as it tripled in size, gaining the volume of a house.

Unprepared for such an opponent, the dragon attempted to smack Nox down with his wing. That proved to be a costly mistake. Feline claws sliced through the protective aether layer, then sunk into the scales.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Scales flew off, and along with them, the second illusion of the dragon shattered.

ADULT DRAGON

Species: REFLEX DRAGON

Class: MAGIC

Health: 78%

Traits:

- **BODY 95**
- **MIND 80**
- **REACTION 105**
- **PERCEPTION 70**
- **MAGIC 35**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **Flight (Species Unique)**
- **Scale shield (Species Unique)**
- **Aether shield (Species Unique)**

Weakness: EYES

Chapter 903: Darkness and Dragons

Roaring in pain, the dragon tried to mask itself in illusion once more. The success was partial. The wounds that the large crackling puma had dealt remained visible, like tears of reality. It didnt help that Nox had proceeded to bite the dragons wing with every pair of fangs on his body.

Dozens of point attacks concentrated on a single point. All the awakened were adept at using their combat splitting and coordinating their attacks.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Red rectangles stacked up, reducing the dragons overall health by a quarter. Yet, many of the domain rulers were still holding back. They knew from experience that the greatest vulnerability was at the point of victory.

Count, well go for the eyes again! Ablu ordered. Dal, Pierce, soften those eyes!

Its not as easy as you make it sound, Pierce replied, though he switched spells mid casting.

Dallion, on the other hand, didnt. Instead, he concentrated on canceling out the sounds the creature was making.

Two blades split the air, flying straight at the beasts head. The partial illusion did little to provide protection. Both tips struck almost simultaneously, shattering the scales on the dragons eyelid.

AGGRAVATED STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 150%

PERMANENT EFFECT - BLEEDING

LUSTRA has been scarred by the attack. The scar will continue bleeding in the real world until the status is removed.

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

The weapons bounced off, unable to continue deeper into the eye. Abba and the Count instantly summoned their blades back, ready for another attempt, but they already knew they had lost the initiative.

Nox! Come back! Dallion shouted.

The crackling hesitated, but did as told, returning to Dallions personal realm. Barely had Nox done so when the dragon spun in the air, like a hurricane. Arms, wings, and tail extended, sending hundreds of line attacks in all directions.

Shit! Dallion burst into instances, casting aether parries in each. He had seen beasts react this way in the wilderness. Back when he was a hunter, he'd occasionally come across creatures that didn't want to admit defeat, neither to themselves nor their enemies. As a result, they'd lash out with everything they had in a final attempt to take their attackers down with them.

Massive chunks of stone fell as the realm itself suffered the brunt of the line strikes. Over ninety-five percent of Dallions instances faded away due to lethal damage. Some of the other nobles weren't as lucky. In the case of three, even having over a hundred options proved not enough. The sheer strength of the line attacks proved unstoppable, ejecting them back into the real world, their powers sealed.

Use a cylinder, old man, Onda suggested. A few good hits and

Before he could finish, Dallion charged forward. It was a reckless move, like the ones he used to do back during his awakening trials. Knowing that failure held no real consequences acted as a confidence boost, forcing him to try out various approaches.

What are you doing? The hammer guardian shouted as Dallion combined athletic and acrobatic skills to leap from one realm fragment to another, losing tens of instances every second.

I learn when I'm in danger, Dallion replied, his arms moving so fast that it seemed that there were four of them, each holding a weapon. And the greatest enemy is me, he added mentally.

In its current state, the dragon was wounded, desperate, and distracted. Without a doubt it was extremely dangerous, and yet one of the greatest opportunities Dallion would ever have. It wasn't just his mind telling him that, but his heart as well.

Twenty of his instances leaped onto a giant block of ceiling falling down. A split second later, three line attacks reduced it to rubble, fading nineteen of them away. Without hesitation, Dallion chose the twentieth instance to become reality, then split again.

Markers materialized in front of him; first the small skill specific pointers, then the large green and red shapes, telling him which areas would be subject to attack and which not. So many of them overlapped, transforming the space into a cat's cradle of extreme danger and certain death.

Spark! He performed a multi attack in front of him.

ATTACK NEGATED

You sliced LUSTRA's attack in two.

Attack has no effect.

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ATTACK NEGATED

You sliced LUSTRA's attack in two.

Attack has no effect.

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by LUSTRA.

Attack has no effect.

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by LUSTRA.

Attack has no effect.

ATTACK NEGATED

You sliced LUSTRA's attack in two.

Attack has no effect.

Red and purple rectangles stacked up.

Only wound it! another set of nearby instances shouted.

Dallion saw that he wasn't the only one burning to take a piece of the dragon. Bloodlust and eagerness filled Ablas' body, as he too fought through the dragon's defenses.

Both domain rulers shared the same goal, but like everything else, when it came to the awakened world, there would be no second place. They hadn't formed a party, so only one could kill the dragon and claim the prize of victory.

I can do it, Dallion told himself. His level exceeded Ablas, not to mention he had all twelve skills. It should be easy to earn the kill. All it would take is a spell to slow the duke down, and

Dal, Giaccia whispered from his hand. Let it go.

I can kill it! Dallion protested. The dragon was right there. At this distance, it was already easier to avoid the creatures attacks than if he would pull back.

I know. You wont achieve anything if you do. Im not telling you to stop, just not kill him. Deal the first strike.

That sounded like a consolation prize: the knowledge that he could have killed the dragon, but let Abba do it instead. There was no way the duke would admit to that; there was no way anyone would believe him if he did. Only Dallion would know.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion avoided the dragons wing. He was less than ten feet from the creatures chest. Attack and zoology markers clearly showed all the weak spots he could take advantage of.

No! Dallion shouted and sunk all three of his swords into the dragons chest, immediately following up with a triple point attack.

DRAGON SLAYER

(+5 Body, +5 Reaction, +5 Perception)

ABLA has killed a reflex dragon. Thats one for the history books. Question is, is there more to come?

The creatures massive body exploded in a cloud of bright orange particles, bringing an abrupt end to the attacks. Chunks of stone kept on falling for a few seconds more the results of the devastation. Only Dallion remained in the air, kept there thanks to the whip blade that had wrapped itself around him.

Are you okay? Gleam asked.

No. Dallion looked down below at Abba.

The noble was breathing heavily. His desire to be first had taken a lot out of him, yet it was undeniable that he had earned the kill.

And once again, your idiot nature returns, Adzorgs voice came from the whip blade. Somehow the old man had convinced Gleam to act as his interpreter. You have no idea how lucky you are! What do you think would have happened had your name had been on that achievement? Did you think that the rest of the party would give you a pat on the back and wish you well? This is their hunt. You were invited to assist, not to take the kills. If theres anyone to be upset, its Pierce. His rank isnt far from Abbas. You, dear boy, arent even in the running.

You know better than that, Dallion whispered beneath his breath.

I do, and you made me vow to keep it that way. A count, even a prodigious one, doesnt stand up to a high-noble of Abbas stature. Not in plain sight of everyone.

Dallion could feel his heart thumping like a drum. A small part of him wanted to go on a rampage and release all the anger he had amassed. Thankfully, he did the next best thing: use his music skills to keep his emotions in check, then gradually tone them down.

Not in plain sight, Dallion told himself. Not yet.

Now that the battle was over, the consequences were a lot more serious than anyone had expected. Four members of the Twelve Suns had been ejected outside the realm likely to be killed in the wilderness. Of the remaining seventeen, all but five had received damage from minor to serious. Even when combining Pierce and Dallion's magic spells, Lux also had to make a brief appearance to heal anything that was curable. One person had so many permanent penalties that he'd be equally burned in the real world as well as in the awakened realms.

Would be best to drop to fourteen, the Count said. No point in carrying damaged goods.

I'd forgotten your way with people, Astra said, using an artifact of some sort to sharpen her saber.

If they can't face this, what do you think will happen when we fight the real thing? We're saving their lives by dropping them. We're saving our lives.

Now that Dallion had calmed down, he had a chance to assess the situation logically. The monster they had fought had turned out to be nothing more than an adult version of the ferals. By the looks of it, they weren't even close to the nest.

Concentrating, Dallion looked further into the domain. Even with the light of Pierce's fireballs, there was nothing to be seen. Then again, he had fought the same just before the dragon had attacked.

I think it's a safe bet she knows we're here, Dallion said.

Everyone stopped whatever they were doing and looked at him.

The dragon is female, he clarified. I thought I mentioned that. Anyway, we no longer have the element of surprise.

We never had the element of surprise. The Count shook his head.

Or maybe we do, Pierce joined in the conversation. Big beasts like big prey. If she'd known, she'd be here finishing us off. This one is just another part of her litter wandering about, just older. We could still have the first strike.

Always the optimist. Aba didn't seem at all pleased. For someone who had received a dragon slayer achievement, one would have thought that he'd be flaunting it left and right. If one dragon found us, the others could too.

We just have to be careful about it. Our entrance was sloppy, but now that we have a taste, things should be fine. Also, I agree with the Count. We leave everyone who can't take it behind. From here on, we're using extreme stealth. And that means no item use. He pointed at Aba as he spoke. Even I caught your bloodlust near the end.

One glance from the duke was enough for everyone to drop the topic.

How long will it take to find a nest in a realm like this? Astra sheathed her blade.

Two weeks, the Count answered without batting an eye. Three, if we want to take risks. After that, we'll be at a serious disadvantage.

In that case Aba stood up. Even with the battle damage, an invisible aura of authority surrounded him. There could be no doubt that he was the leader of the Twelve Suns. Some might even believe that he was worthy of being the next Tamin emperor. We find the nest in less than two weeks. The heart of every domain is in its center. We just have to take the indirect route getting there.

In less than two weeks, Dallion couldn't help himself from adding. Without using magic.

That's what were here for.

You want to be a player as well, don't you? Dallion thought. If you pull this off, you'll be able to pressure the emperor to openly recognize you as his heir.

On the other hand, this was also the perfect opportunity for the emperor to nibble at Ablas ambitions at the bud.

Chapter 904: Heart of the Realm

Harpsisword in hand, Dallion quietly crawled through the tightest spaces that the realm would provide him. According to Pierce, the rings and the high skill levels granted by the Order of the Twelve Suns guaranteed that they'd be invisible to everything short of the Moons. Unfortunately, Dallion no longer believed that.

The greater the awakened level, the more options existed for bending the rules. In theory, the rings were supposed to prevent him from communicating with anyone within his realm, let alone people half the way across the world. In practice, the combination of companions, music skills, domain ruler abilities, and personal echoes allowed him to bypass the restrictions. His personal echoes knew everything as it happened, as did the guardians of the weapons he held. In turn they could communicate with everyone else within Dallion's domain network.

It was in this manner that he had managed to share the events with Euryale, as well as learn what was going on in the outside world. It seemed that the war had heated up again, though not on a front that Dallion needed to be worried about. The Azure federation had gone inland and clashed with a surprisingly capable cadre of imperial soldiers. From what the gorgon had learned, two archdukes had combined their forces, and with the assistance of a few imperial legions had managed to drive the attackers out. The Order of the Seven Moons remained neutral, although sightings of war cleric armies had become more abundant. Mirror Pools all across the empire were discreetly evacuating their members, moving to Sandstorm. Furies were doing the same in ever-increasing numbers. Only the hunters remained hesitant, more often than not choosing to sell their services to archdukes and other provincial nobles.

Dallion had made several attempts to get in touch with Dark, but it seemed that the Moons were keeping the dragon out of it. Possibly it was for the better; he wasn't strong enough to face anything as powerful as this, not to mention there was no telling how he would react upon seeing an unfamiliar dragon.

A hundred feet away, on the other side of the tunnel, Pierce waved his hand in an attempt to attract Dallion's attention. Getting the hint, Dallion waved back.

Stay there. Pierce's lips moved without making a sound. I found one ahead.

Dallion nodded. The realm structure he was in didn't have any obvious way forward. There were several openings leading further away from the giant corridor, as well as one leading up.

I'll go up to check. Dallion shaped the answer with his lips.

Combining athletics and acrobatics, he rushed up faster than a wall gecko. The passage curved and split, but eventually it led to a section above the cluster of realm structures. From there, Dallion was able to get a better view of the chamber that lay beyond.

Surely enough, there was a dragonlet there. The better news was that the creature wasn't aware of their presence.

Time to close the net, Dallion said to himself.

Five days ago, after Abba had earned his dragon slayer achievement, the group had split, making their way to the realms center. Everyone was free to proceed as they wished, following two basic rules: be stealthy and always remain in sight of at least one other member of the group. That way whoever found the dragon nest first would let everyone else know. Now it had finally happened.

Dallion quickly made his way back down. It was tempting to use magic, but he didn't want to risk scaring off the dragonlet. Sprinting through the massive tunnel, he then rushed to where Pierce was.

I think this is it, he whispered. It's younger than anything we've seen.

Age wasn't a factor, but odds were good that the nest itself wasn't far off.

I'll tell the rest to gather, the mage whispered back.

Just tell them we found a dragon, Dallion quickly said. Let's see what it does first.

It took half a minute for Pierce to convey the message to the next member of the hunting party, after which, he and Dallion closed in on the dragonlet. From a distance, the creature was the epitome of innocence. Curious about its surroundings, it would waddle about, looking at every strangely shaped piece of rock with so much fascination as if it were an undiscovered treasure. For over an hour it went back and forth with no plan or pattern until suddenly a change was forced on it.

Hidden within the honeycomb of structures, Dallion heard the distant sound of flapping wings. Immediately, he raised a finger, telling Pierce to remain cautious.

The sound of wings grew progressively, until the expected happened a large amber dragon became visible near the realms ceiling, making its way towards the dragonlet. A basic layer of illusion surrounded it, although not as thorough as the one the group had fought upon entering the realm had. Its size was truly impressive.

Think that's her? Pierce whispered.

No, just another adult, Dallion replied, using the spell Adzorg had taught him to partially glimpse through the illusion. Just an adult.

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So, there's more of them

Upon reaching the dragonlet, the dragon didn't even slow down. Sending out an air current, it grabbed the very confused infant, then turned around, flying back to where it came from. This was what Dallion was waiting for. Combining athletic, acrobatic, art, and music skills, he leaped after the creature. Pierce followed immediately after.

Faster than a lightning bolt, the two leaped from spot to spot, always keeping an obstacle between them and the adult dragon. Behind them, other members of the party followed as the net was slowly pulled in a specific direction.

The dragon didn't seem to be overly cautious, more occupied in keeping the fidgeting dragonlet in the air. The closer it got to the center heart of the realm, the more the open spaces grew. The clusters of structures moved further and further away, becoming smaller and smaller until at one point they stopped altogether.

Not wanting to risk getting seen, Dallion stopped. An opening the size of a huge valley extended ahead. More spherical than flat, the empty space stretched in all directions, only interrupted by a mountain structure in the middle.

The nest. Dallion thought.

Slightly dome-shaped, it stretched all the way up to the ceiling, covered in ragged cliffs and hundreds of cave openings. In many ways, it was closer to a hive than a nest, sticking out like a sore thumb. The dragon had clearly added it later, proclaiming the realm as its own. It made an all-out charge all the more difficult: there was no obvious way to get to the mountain unnoticed, not to mention that if the dragon had domain ruler abilities the mountain itself was a lethal weapon.

Lets wait for the others here, Dallion said.

Isn't it a bit close? Pierce glanced back at the way they had arrived from.

For a dragon like that, it wouldn't matter. Either it knows we're here or it doesn't.

Not the best line of reasoning, but Pierce went with it.

Bit by bit, the rest of the group arrived.

The Count was the fifth to show up, his expression conveying his disapproval of the location better than any words could. Abba arrived a few minutes later along with a third of the overall group. Tors, naturally, was among them. Looking at his cousin, Dallion could almost feel pity. The Elazni remained pale, as if he'd been through a week of heavy drinking and intense flu.

What do we have? Abba asked.

Nothing good, The Count replied before anyone else had a chance to. Too open for us to hide, too far for us to sprint. A spell will stir the entire nest, sending anything with wings against us, and that's before we come to face the big one. We can only guess what its skills are.

Or that of its mate, Dallion added, more out of spite towards the Count than anything else.

Yes The Count gave him a warning glance. There's no way of knowing if we'll be facing one of them.

We can bring it here, Astra suggested. We don't have to make a sneak, just make it believe we're making one.

Really, Astra? Tors snorted. A quick gesture from Abba made him quickly shut up.

A small group charges head on to flush the smaller creatures out, the woman continued. Pierce and Dal could use a few large spells, since theres no point in hiding anymore. If the big one hasnt come out by them, thatll make it.

Then the main group pulls back to a fortified position, Abl finished for her. The problem is, what here could be considered a fortified position? The rings make us invisible, but the dragon remains the domain ruler.

Maybe not. The rectangles showed us that the domain was broken. That doesnt mean that theres no guardian, but it doesnt mean there is one.

Possible. the Count nodded. Itll still have the advantage, though. Even if it doesnt use domain tricks, it can scorch through anything here.

Unless we dont fight here, Dallion added.

The suggestion seemed pretty out of the box even for him, for everyoneeven the Countturned towards him, expectantly.

We shatter the realm, Dallion said, his heart tightening at the suggestion. That will spit everyone into the real world and He paused to take a deep breath. Even when it came to guardian-less domains, the notion of deliberately destroying it from within made him uneasy. And collapse the ruins on top of the dragons, he finished. We were on the outside when we entered the realm, so we wont have to worry about falling debris. Not to the extent they would.

A smile curved on the Counts face.

Then we finish off what we started in the open, he said. Wont be easy, but wed have negated its greatest advantages. The sealed will be at risk, but theyre done for, anyway. I think we should go for it. He turned to Abl. Doesnt look like well have a better chance.

It still wont work! Tors said, almost in panic. Theres at least one domain ruler. We felt the bubble in the real world. Were just changing one terrain for another.

And you prefer to fight here? Astra shook her head.

Im just saying that charging head on might be better. At least then we have the element of surprise.

Why not do both? Pierce joined in after a long period of silence. If we fight here, were at an obvious disadvantage. If we try to break the realm, we give the dragon the chance to prepare. What if we break the realm while also breaking the nest? That way, the dragon will think that were targeting it here, and in a way we will be. However, our goal will also be to shatter whats behind the mountain as well.

The plan sounded crazy enough to actually work. In his mind, Dallion could picture it. A large enough magic attack combined with hundreds of line and point attacks would create the impression that they were trying to kill the dragon within its realm. Hed have to sacrifice all his ray of destruction cylinders, and use several echoes, but it might just be doable.

How many echoes can you make? Dallion asked Pierce.

A bit more than a dozen. After that, their magic wont be worth much.

It can work. The only question is wholl lead the fake charge? I doubt sending an echo would work, so anyone who goes will be in more danger than anyone else.

Do you have to ask? Aba crossed his arms. I will. Pierce, can you find some time to cast a few magic barriers during everything else?

Yes. The mage nodded. Shouldnt be a problem. Against a great dragon, theyll be worth crap, though.

They dont have to stop any attack, just look flashy. Ill take care of the rest.

Chapter 905: The Backstab

It took half a day for everyone to get into position. Even if they suspected that the great dragon was aware of their presence, no one wanted to tempt fate too much. Three Dallion clones positioned themselves on the far side of the valley. Three of Pierces also joined them, each with one destruction ray cylinder. In theory, that guaranteed at least seven rays of destruction, though as every hunter whod faced a strong beast in the wilderness knew, nothing could be taken for granted.

A group of five was chosen to lead the fake charge. Aba had already made his intention known. It remained unclear whether hed done so out of ego, or was actually aiming for the imperial throne. The Count was firmly beside him. Since the short time theyd been together, Dallion had only managed to learn that the old man might actually be the most skilled hunter in the world. The reason for his name erasure was slightly concerning, not to mention there was strong evidence that it came with a Moon vow to serve. A bigger question was whether he was serving Aba, the emperor, or someone else entirely.

Two more inner sanctum members had also volunteered their services. Dallion didnt know either of them, but suspected their awakening levels were over a hundred. As for the last member, it came as a total surprise to all.

Thats really a bad idea. Dallion pulled Tors to the side. Odds are the worst for the chargers.

And the rest of the realm is safe? the Elazni snorted. If it turns out that the dragon has full control of the domain, were all sealed.

Sealed, Dallion thought. Only a sheltered would think that. If things went poorly, none of them would end up sealedtheyd end up dead. Even in the off chance that Tors had some transportation artifact hidden on him, the dragon they were facing could kill him before he got a chance to activate it.

Being near Aba is the safest place there is, Tors continued. You worry about yourself.

Aba will protect himself, not you.

So, its just a matter of where I stand.

Why are you doing this, Tors? Do you want to become archduke that badly? Trust me, it isnt a life youll get used to. Politics and intrigue are your arena. Outside of the capital, things get dirty, and if you want to maintain your power, youll need to constantly get involved.

You think its about that? The noble openly laughed. I dont want the stinking title. You can have it for all I care. Striving for it is just a stepping stone. As long as I have the right connections, great-grandma will be forced to reconsider her current decision and make me the head of House Elazni.

Tors shoved past Dallion, joining the rest of the group.

Charming, isn't he? Gleam whispered in her whip blade shape. I doubt he'll last one minute.

He won't. Dallion agreed.

Could that be the reason he was sent on the hunt in the first place? Duchess Elazni had claimed both of them had been selected, but she never mentioned she wasn't involved in the decision.

You alright? Pierce approached Dallion. We need you in full form.

Yeah Dallion looked at Tors. He didn't like the man. In fact, he outright despised him, but seeing him rush to his own slaughter filled him with mixed feelings. Just going through the plan, he lied. The attack group has to be strong enough to get close or the dragons will see through it.

They'll handle it. The noble mage didn't seem at all concerned.

Two of them, at least. Tors he waved his hand.

Abla and the Count are all that matter.

As the attack group went into position, Dallion and all three of his echoes started casting the ray of destruction spell. Even with his current stats and level, he remained unable to cast it as quickly as one of the former battle mages those that had been born with their abilities, not received them.

After several minutes, Abla received the nod.

COMBAT INITIATED

The red rectangle emerged the moment Abla dashed forward with his group. He was running at an impressive speed, passing miles in seconds. Of course, Dallion could tell he was holding back because of the rest of the group, especially Tors.

Let's roll the dice, Dallion said and released his spell.

Four rays of destruction shot almost simultaneously from various points of the realm's valley, striking the mountain in the center. They were followed moments later by three more, released from the clay cylinders by Pierce's echoes.

TERMINAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased 1000%

TERMINAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased 1000%

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased 200%

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased 200%

FATAL HIT

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Dealt damage is increased 500%

Red rectangles popped up in the distance. The rays had managed to kill a few of the nests occupants, though not as many as Dallion hoped.

Scores of point and line attacks immediately followed, as the five attackers burst into hundreds of instances.

Reminds me of when we cleaned up the wyvern nest, Pierce said, sending off one glowing ball of white fire after another. Their goal wasnt so much to deal damage than to light up the realm, allowing the party to have a better look. Even after getting used to the realm, the near total absence of light affected their perception. There were so many that we had to walk on corpses for hours after the initial attack, and thered still always be more of the creatures.

Giant cracks appeared on the valley floor, causing part of the mountain to collapse on itself.

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 57%

Without a doubt, the initial attack had caused massive damage to the realm, yet no one cheered. With all the destructive power, many had hoped that it would be a lot more significant.

Two more times, Dallion thought.

As long as his echoes managed to cast the ray of destruction spell twice more, the realm would collapse. The question was whether everyone else could survive for that long. Casting the spell took him minutes, which meant that in a best-case scenario, they had to withstand the dragons response for another five.

Roars filled the air as, on cue, dragons emerged from the mountains nest openings. All of them were adult or adolescent, brimming with bloodlust and ferociousness. Point and line attacks bounced off, merely pushing the creatures back.

Use spark attacks! someone yelled.

Dallions attention, however, remained focused on Ablas group. So far, they had crossed about a fifth of the distance to the dragon nest, and that wasnt good. While a few of the dragons sent wind attacks around indiscriminately, most quickly focused their anger and attention on the only enemies openly available to them.

Deep growling was heard all across the valley. A large dragon twisted in the air, then flapped its wings, swooping down to the ground. Stopping a few feet above the surface, it propelled itself forward, aiming for a frontal collision with Ablas.

The duke cast three point attacks, then threw his weapon at the creatures head. With no magic to soften the beasts eyes, the sword bounced off the hard surface, merely causing the dragon to move its head in annoyance.

Ablas followed up by summoning his weapon back and repeating the attack. The precision was frightening, as it struck the same eye without hesitation. This time, the dragon flinched, moving its head down. In doing so it touched the ground and due to the built-up inertia flipped over, plowing through the rock.

Clearly, Aba wasn't considered a contender for the throne for nothing.

Several more adult dragons set their sights on him. Learning from the first's mistakes, they flew directly at him, staying at a fair distance from the ground and each other.

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 55%

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 53%

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 51%

The health of the realm steadily diminished. The line attacks were causing more damage than Dallion initially expected. The realization caused him to shift from casting a ray of destruction and join in with the spark attack frenzy. His echoes continued with their casting, though, to be on the safe side.

Dozens more dragons emerged, ranging from adolescent to adult. All of them were difficult opponents in their own right, yet there was no sign of the ancient one. Dallion was certain she was there, yet for some reason refused to join the fray. Like an empress sitting on her throne, she observed what the others were doing, waiting for the right moment to make an appearance.

We can actually do this, Dallion thought. Without the great dragon, Aba would have no issue surviving a few more minutes. Unlike the fights before, he didn't have to kill the dragons, just prevent them from killing him.

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 49%

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 47%

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 45%

The realm's stability kept on decreasing.

Tell Nox to get out here! Dallion said as he kept on doing point attacks. He can have all the fun he wants.

It took less than a second for the crackling to emerge, pouncing on a structure close to Dallion. Four spiderwebs of cracks covered the building, causing it to crumble almost instantly. The creature did not stop there, bursting into ten copies of itself that leaped to destroy more of the nearby realm structures. The damage was noticeably less than that caused by a point attack, but unlike everyone else, Nox was a crackling and his attacks were significantly more lethal where realms were concerned.

Nice trick, Astra said, looking at one of Noxs copies with a combination of bloodlust and adoration. Youll have to tell me how to get one for myself.

No chance, Dallion thought, only giving out a smile.

Another dragon turned away, as the wounds received from Ablass sword discouraged it. Two more presented an immediate threat. The noble was just about to subject them to the same treatment, when suddenly one of his companions performed a point attack. The difference was that the target wasnt the mountain or any dragon, but Ablass himself.

What the heck?! Dallion stared as the force hit the duke in the back. Normally, such an attack would be lethal from such a distance.

Massive armor plates of sky silver and Moon platinum suddenly emerged, ripping through his clothes and other armor. Thick enough to be worn by a golem, they deflected the blow, though not without thrusting Ablass forward.

Unwilling to give up, the man started a second attack, only to be attacked by the count. Meanwhile, Tors completely froze.

You Star-damned idiot! Dallion swore and dashed forward.

There was no logic in his action. He had warned Tors about the dangers of joining the attack group; he held no further loyalty towards him. After everything that had happened, it would have been a lot simpler and beneficial to leave matters to resolve themselves on their own. And still, he found that he couldnt. One didnt get to choose their family, and despite the piece of scum that his cousin was, he remained the favorite of their great-grandmother.

Casting several spells to boost his speed and reflexes, Dallion went forward as fast as his body would allow. The Count was doing a good job handling the person who had attacked, but there was no telling if he was the only traitor.

Dont freeze up! Dallion shouted the least useful bit of advice, while also using his music skills in an attempt to instill some calm and bravery into Tors.

Seeing what was going on, the fifth member of the attack group turned around, sword drawn to take on Dallion.

So, youre a traitor as well. Dallion gritted his teeth.

There was no getting around it. Hed have to fight in the open, leaving himself and everyone else to the mercy of the approaching dragons. The point of no return had already been passed. Even if Ablass were to join the fight immediately, they couldnt get out of the valley before the dragons reached them.

Two rays of destruction hit the dragons nest, burning any dragon in their path. A split second later, they were followed by a third.

REALM DESTROYED

A red rectangle emerged.

Youve gotten faster, Dallion managed to say, before reality faded away.

Chapter 906: The Wolf's Prison

An instant of stillness wrapped the entire world, before real world reality took hold. Massive cracks covered the entire massive structure. Coming to his senses, Dallion leaped away as quickly as possible. That was the point at which the ruin was supposed to crumble. It didnt. Instead, it burst like an overripe tomato.

Roars mixed with screams as chunks of rock and dragon body parts filled the air. Having grown for Moons know how long, the realm of the dragon nest had surpassed the space in its real world equivalent. It was rather fortunate that the Order of Twelve Suns had gone with the realm destruction plan instead of taking on the dragon nest directly. Even without the ancient dragon, there was no way they could win against so many of them. Even now, theyd face a difficult time mopping up with the surviving beasts. That wasnt Dallions main concern, though.

Bursting into instances, he looked around, focusing on Abla and the traitors locations. His fingers moved on their own, summoning his whip blade and aura sword.

Guard Abla, he told the whip blade guardian, rushing in the direction of the nearest traitor.

The man had just readjusted to the new reality, taking Dallions attack head on. Sun gold tendrils shout out from his clothes, darting at Dallion like venomous snakes.

PERMANENT EFFECT - BLEEDING

You have been scarred by the attack. The scar will continue bleeding in the real world until the status is removed.

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

A red rectangle flashed before Dallions eyes, just as the affected instance faded away.

Permanent effects? He leaped back.

The bleeding wasnt a big issue. He knew several spells that could quickly deal with that, not to mention that, at his level, he could spark the wound out of existence. Sadly, the process was going to take a few daysnot something that could be done during a fight. Additionally, if the armor could affect one instance in such fashion, it could do the same on more.

Die! the traitor shouted, following up Dallions stepping back with a point attack.

At this distance, there was no chance of escape. Using every ounce of speed within his body, Dallion tried to evade, only managing half way. Force that would shatter mountains struck him in the shoulder, sending him flying back.

The pain made him feel as if his entire arm had been torn off yet it wasnt. His hand was right there, sore, but very much attached. No bones were sticking out, he could still move it about, even his grip hadnt loosened.

This must be like what it is to have a body trait of over a hundred,he thought, still flying backwards.

His reaction trait made him feel as if he were moving through the air in slow motion. The ground itself appeared to move along inch by inch. Fifty feet away, the traitor remained in the same position, sword thrust forward.

Any other time, Dallion would have found it amusing. Not today. Today, he had enough of insignificant worms, throwing a wrench in far greater matters for petty, selfish reasons.

Ignoring the pain, Dallion cast a series of five-circle healing spells to deal with his immediate injuries. The pain quickly subsided. That was not all. Almost in the same motion, Dallion combined his scholar and magic spellcraft skills to cast a flight spell to counter the force pulling him back. A thousandth of a second later he repeated the spell, only this time propelling himself back at the traitor.

Concentrating on the mans leg, Dallion threw his aura sword forward. The moment his fingers released the hilt, he slid all blocker rings off his fingers.

Wheres Eury? he asked within his realm.

Dal? A surprised Veil responded. I thought you were

Is she alright?

Yeah, shes fine. There was a momentary pause. Shes still discussing matters in one of the Orders monasteries.

Tell her to get back to Alliance right away! We might be at war with the empire soon.

In the real world, Dallions aura sword hit its target, sending the traitor to the ground. From his perspective, reality had played a trick on his senses, since the person who hed hit with a point attack had inexplicably changed direction and was now flying back. The sun gold tendrils attempted to compensate for the injury, trying to prop up their owner.

Stop! Dallion ordered, using the full effect of his music skills to overwhelm both person and item guardian with an aura of authority.

The tendrils froze, leaving the traitor semi-propped up like a modern art display.

How many are there? Dallion moved closer.

The traitors mouth twitched. The pressure he was under didnt allow him not to reply. Apparently, something else did, since his eyes suddenly turned, rendering him lifeless.

His item guardians didnt fare much better. Within seconds, the sun gold armor broke up, dropping the corpse to the ground as it shattered under its weight. Weapons, gear, even clothes ripped up before Dallions very eyes. Everything that stood even a remote chance of helping him find an answer to the question had been utterly, and irreparably destroyed. It seemed that the archbishop was right.

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Looking away from the body, Dallion refocused his attention on the immediate surroundings. The remnants of the group had engaged the surviving dragons. Three people more traitors by the looks of it were trying to get to Abla, who lay wounded on the ground. Judging by the state of his armor, he had been among those unfortunate enough to be hit by the exploding ruin in the instants after returning to the real world.

The Count was diligently protecting him, facing off against two of the attackers, while Pierce was doing his best to protect both of them from any dragon taking advantage of their weakness.

Astra was nowhere to be seen. And as for Tors, he remained dumbfounded on the ground, mouth wide open, refusing to believe what was happening.

Its a lot different from scrolls and realm recreations, isnt it? Dallion grumbled internally as he flew towards the nearest threat.

They are prepared! Gleam said, as she kept slashing at a tall man in sky silver armor. All of them have illusion armor thats beyond me.

Return to my realm, Dallion ordered, summoning his harpsisword.

A large dragonlet foolishly roared in his direction. Larger than most of the younglings, it felt confident enough to attack a human.

Dont! Dallion said with his voice of authority.

The dragonlet froze, its very being filled with terror.

Dallion didnt pay it any further attention, throwing his harpsisword at one of the men engaged with Ablā. The weapon struck something inches from the targets back. As Gleam had said, there was an armor of illusion preventing the attack from proceeding further. The ring that Pierce had given out was doing a great job of keeping the artifact gear hidden. Yet, Giaccia was more than a simple harpsisword. The blade spun around, a thick layer of water covering it. Millions of tendrils burst out, surrounding the man, like in a spiders cocoon. While the armor remained unbreakable, the water threads prevented its owner from moving. The hold strengthened, like a boa constrictor wrapped around a deer.

Die! Tors shouted in panic and anger.

Music strands of pain and extreme confusion went through the air, as the Elazni regained part of his courage. They werent the traitors main cause for concern. Too weak to deal him any serious damage, they merely caused some inconvenience, yet they didnt have to. The safeguards placed within the turncoats realm triggered, killing him in the same fashion the previous one had died.

Stay down! Dallion told his cousin.

No sooner had he said it, when the Counts blade exploded into thousands of small metal slivers, showering the two remaining enemies like explosive shrapnel. All the mens items and gear crumbled as they fell lifelessly to the ground. Someone had put in a lot of effort to organize this, and it wasnt the nymphs.

Are there any more? the old hunter asked, as fragments flew back towards him, reconstituting the blade of his weapon.

Dont think so. Dallion looked around.

Other than Pierce, there were only a few remaining members of the inner sanctum left, all focusing on surviving. Even if a message had been sent out to the rest of the Order, the lesser members could do nothing against the present threat. That was if they even bothered to show up.

Casting a large aether sphere around the area, Dallion rushed to Ablā.

How is it? he asked. He could see signs of bleeding, though no indication where the blood was coming from. As he reached for the armor, the metal plates reacted.

No use, Abla said with a cough. It will attack anyone close until Im healed.

Must be some heirloom.

Its more than that. Its one of the Orders early creations. Wisdom from the ages, combined with otherworldly knowledge. He added with a dry laugh.

How long till you heal?

Abla didnt say.

Carefully, Dallion cast a healing spell. A green pattern surrounded the dukes shoulder. The armor didnt seem to mind, although there was no telling how effective the magic was.

We need to get back to the palace. The Count approached. If there are traitors in the inner sanctum, therell be more among the rest.

Wheres Astra?

A rather good question that had only one answer. Nothing was capable of fleeing the area that fast. The only reason for her to be gone was if shed been devoured by dragons.

Pierce is fine, the Count replied diplomatically.

Tors is useless, Dallion added. Its only us two. Feeling any better?

I think so.

Good, so it only blocks hostile magic. Ill try to levitate you, then well fly out of here.

We must destroy the nest.

Forget the nest! Forget the dragons! People are trying to kill you! If you dont return to the capital, theyll succeed.

Its by no means certain that the emperor is behind this, dear boy, Adzorg was quick to point out. Im not saying that Abla isnt a political threat, just not to the emperor. Maybe in a hundred years he would be, if the emperor has no heir, but as things stand there are others that would gain more. Namely, the remaining dukes and duchesses.

An adolescent dragon slammed into Dallions aether sphere, shattering it completely. It wasnt a particularly difficult feat Dallion had cast the spell mainly to discourage other people from charging in. Dragons were a whole different matter.

You two keep him safe, Dallion turned around to face the creature.

Barely had he said so, when a beam of purple light struck the dragon from above, going through it like a hot needle through butter.

What would you do without me? Pierce asked from a fair distance away. Possibly, he was going to add something more when the ground beneath the ruins shot up like a gayer. Rocks and magic filled the sky once more, cutting anything in their path.

A full set of magic armor covered the mage, likely triggered by the attack. Sadly, that did nothing to stop his quick demise. Thousands of stone fragments chipped away at the aether covering him, then proceeded to shred his defenseless body.

Purple lightning shot into the sky, bringing with it an entity far more terrifying than any of them had seen so far.

Freeze, a female voice ordered.

Intense pressure fell upon every living creature in the area. Dragons petrified mid-flight, falling like stones to the ground. Even Dallion felt the weight of mountains push him down. The level of his traits helped him withstand the attack with little issue, though not everyone else was as fortunate. The Count visibly struggled to remain standing, as did what was left of the inner sanctum.

You're the one, aren't you? the dragon asked, looking at Dallion with its massive purple eyes. Twice as large as any dragon they'd seen, it took a step out of the crater that had been the ruins, its bright amber scales glistening like gems.

The attack upon the nest within the ruins realm had managed to wound it, burning off part of its wing, but that was all it had achieved.

So predictable. The creature extended its good wing. I told you I'd be waiting, and you still came, rushing like a lamb to open the wolf's prison.

Concentrating as much as he could, Dallion tried to see through the dragon's illusion and get a sense of its skills. The only thing he could see was a single thing: Great Dragon Aquilequia.

Chapter 907: An Unlikely Party

Magic threads spread out from the dragon's body, covering any injuries it had sustained. Two wings—one orange and one purple—flapped, lifting the creature into the air. Raw power mixed with hatred emanated from it, having an effect on even the top-level awakened.

That's a great dragon, Dallion thought. It would have been nice if he could use his empathy skills to resolve this without a fight. It would be even better if he could make the creature his familiar. Compared to Aquilequia, all the dragons so far seemed like kittens; not only the dragonlets and young adolescents, but the two ancient ones Dallion had met as well.

You can stop pretending, mage! the dragon snorted, splitting into three instances. In two, its head turned to its right, staring seemingly at nothing. You're not particularly good at it.

Initially, nothing happened. After a few seconds, a flicker of purple light flashed half a mile away, revealing Eleria of the Shimmering Circle. The mage seemed rather well, considering the circumstances. Even so, it was no secret she would have preferred not to be there.

Now, amuse me! All three instances of the dragon flew in different directions.

One darted straight towards Eleria, another swooped down towards Aba and the surrounding gathering, while the first specifically targeted Dallion. There was no time for hesitation.

Spark spiral! He executed the attack.

Every awakened knew that they had to hide their trump cards until their last moment. Using powerful skills carelessly provided information to the world, inevitably weakening the owner in the long term. When facing an opponent of this caliber, though, not going all out was risking a quick death.

A thin curvy line of white emerged, constantly growing as it flew to strike the dragon. Although strong, it wasn't a difficult attack to counter. To Dallion's surprise, that instant of the dragon merely faded away.

Knowing he had to take the initiative, Dallion burst into instances, flying towards the two remaining dragon instances.

The one that attempted to attack Abba was quickly met by a pair of flying weapons. All except Tors were aware they had to be on guard, so they reacted as Dallion had. Eleria was the only exception, choosing to flee while casting minor protective spells rather than take the creature head on. The mages' forms flickered, then vanished, likely teleporting miles away.

The flying weapons changed form, extending so as to tear off as many dragon scales as possible. Before they got the chance, the instance faded away, leaving the one in the air.

It's toying with us, Abba said, full of frustration. If he were in better condition, he would have loved matching strength with such a dangerous specimen. As he was, though, his motivation for fighting was to stay alive.

No, Dallion corrected. It's scouting us. Just like area improvers, only we are the area.

I've never seen anything like this, Vihrogon said within Dallion's realm. I think you'll need me for this.

As he spoke, Dallion summoned the armadillo shield and cast a levitation spell on it.

Gem, Dallion said. Wrap me.

Slight confusion emanated from the aetherfish, but it emerged as well, covering Dallion like a thick layer of jelly. While unable to heal as efficiently as Lux, the familiar knew a fair number of spells and, more importantly, had the ability to multiply any spell Dallion cast.

Dallion's hands and fingers moved at great speed, starting the ray of destruction spell, while also holding two weapons. To anyone beneath a level hundred, it would seem that he had grown two more arms. At such speeds, even reality itself would agree to the illusion.

I shouldn't have used all my echo cylinders, Dallion thought. Even with infinity in the awakened realms, it would be too risky trying to make more now. The moment of confusion upon returning to the real world would be more than enough for Aquilequia to take advantage.

Not very talkative, are you? Dallion asked, using his music skills to seek out any flaw in the dragon's character. Unfortunately, each of the music strands broke off upon coming in contact with the aether covering the monster's scales.

Music? Aquilequia laughed, splitting into two new instances. Why even bother?

Taking a chance, Dallion attempted to use forced combat splitting, though to little avail. The splitting of his opponent was considerable, and while not outright overwhelming, the pressure was enough for Dallion to lose.

Dont despair, dear boy, Adzorg encouraged from Dallions realm. Its more a matter of practice than skill difference.

When did you become such a splitting expert? Dallion did a double spiral attack using both his harpsisword and aura sword. Both attacks landed from such a close distance, yet just as before dealt no damage. Aquilequia merely chose for another of her instances to become reality, then immediately went on a counterattack, filling the sky with torrents of orange flames. Dozens of Dallions instances were burned up, along with many of the instances of people on the ground.

The few other surviving members of the party were finally starting to get to their senses, managing to break through the terror the dragons presence had created. Normally, each would be able to defeat an army; in this case, Dallion doubted theyd amount to anything more than a minor distraction. The only hope was that their heirloom artifacts would be capable of a few surprises.

The Count had already gone out in full force. The armor he was wearing had floated off his body in large chunks, propelling sky silver fragments at the dragon, like the worlds version of a heavy machine gun turret.

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An imperial rocket would be useful about now, Dallion thought. Rather, that was another worry he had. All of Emperor Tamins internal rivals were gathered in one convenient spot. Given the range of the devastating weapon, it was practically certain that no one would escape the magic blast radius. Should the area be glassed, nothing would remain.

Why did you let us wound you? Dallion kept on talking in one of his instances. Fortunately, in this particular case, one of the strands had managed to go through Aquilequias defenses, matching one of her vital emotionspride. You knew we were in the realm. You could have taken us out before we got a chance to attack?

And why would I? One of the dragon instances snorted. You did exactly what I wanted you to do.

You werent hiding in the nest. Dallion carefully considered the implications of what he was saying. It was your prison.

My slaughterhouse. Waves of anger emanated from all of Aquilequias instances. The place where many of me were kept only to be killed. Yet something happened centuries ago; something allowing me to prepare my escape.

Purple lightning covered the dragons body, sending hundreds of bolts in all directions. This wasnt an instance, but pure unadulterated reality.

A third of Dallions instances cast various protective spells as they simultaneously attempted to evade the attacks. In nearly all cases, the attempts were futile. Aquilequias magic easily pierced

through, ending Dallions life in one hit. To his surprise, one of the magic barriers managed to hold out, not without help from Gems boost, of course.

The people on the ground werent so lucky. Unable to react fast enough, the Count was struck by a bolt in the left shoulder. The purple plasma burned right through, melting the appendage and everything covering it. Pain burst within the man, emanating like the sun, and yet he refused to make another sound.

Tors, despite the odds, had been fortunate enough to avoid every attack so far. Rather, it was more appropriate to say that the attacks avoided him. Likely, the dragon recognized he was no threat, so she concentrated her efforts on those that mattered.

Got you! Dallion thought, finally completing his ray of destruction spell. The beam flew straight at the dragon. Unfortunately, Aquilequia was able to react at the very last moment, avoiding a lethal hit.

Boosted by Dallions aetherfish, the ray burned through the dragon's scales, piercing the wing, and striking part of the massive tail. There, it stopped, creating a scorched circle of burned scales, though unable to continue.

One layer, Dallion thought, immediately starting a repeat of the spell. His most powerful spell was only able to burn through one layer of Aquilequias scales. If he were to defeat her, hed have to hit where it counted.

Annoying, arent you? The dragon chose to respond, once again bursting into instances. The low numbers suggested that she didnt have much practice.

Why didnt you escape centuries ago? Dallion asked. His aim wasnt to get an answer from the dragon, but rather use the pride within it as a wedge to perform further attacks.

Aquilequia either understood what he was going for, or didnt particularly care, for instead of an answer she swung around, slapping Dallion with her tail.

Now, it was his turn to feel pain. The moment the dragon had chosen had precisely coincided with the one he used to create a new wave of instances. In his mind, he could almost see the red rectangle of damage as he flew back, all his other instances instantly fading away.

Knowing better than admitting defeat in the slightest, Dallion combat split again just as the pain spread through his body. It was a good thing he did, too, for Aquilequia followed up her attack by having thousands of her scales break off her body and propel towards him, like a wave of bullets.

Shes learning fast, the harpsissword said.

Of course she is, Dallion thought. She was a magic awakened being that had the benefit of observing the actions of those that attacked her. It didnt help that the attempt on Ablas life had forced many to reveal some of their hidden moves. Looking back, Dallion was outright astonished he had managed to survive so long. So much of what hed done during his early levels was outright wrong. The

only reason he had won was because most of his opponents were no better and those that were had much more significant matters to worry about.

Dont think too poorly of yourself, dear boy. Youre actually holding your own against a great dragon.

Maybe, Dallion muttered. But Im not winning.

Two more spiral attacks filled the air, sending a slight shot of pain up his arms. Despite his best attempts, that remained an attack he couldnt use as often as he would have liked. Each next strike risked numbing his hands which, in turn, could disrupt the spell he needed for victory.

Dallions mind raced as it tried to come up with the optimal combination of skills. The truth was that while in the air, spellcraft and music remained his best options. Everything else was either rendered useless because of Aquilequias speed and aether coating, or helped in a purely defensive capacity. As Dallion had grown to know well, defense didnt win battles, it only provided a better opportunity for attack.

A new instance of the dragon spiraled towards Dallion. The movement was elegant, almost mesmerizing. The goal, without a doubt, was to eliminate as many of his instances in a new wave of fire, before following up with another scale attack. Not a bad plan, considering that each action killed off about a hundred instances on average.

Just then, a metalin the size of a building flew up from the ground and launched two thirty-foot lances at the dragon. Naturally, the particular instances quickly faded out of existence.

A mecha? Dallion couldnt believe his eyes. Unlike all the metalins hed seen so far, this one had more than a passing resemblance to the giant sci-fi robots from earth. It was large, blocky, made entirely out of sky silver and sun gold, and had way more decorations than were functionally necessary. Also, several of its parts glowed bright purple with magic.

You wont be able to take it on yourself. The Counts voice came from the metalin. Well have to team up on this one.

Count? Dallion asked. Whats this?

The last remaining living armor, given to the Order as a present from saint Jeremy.

Internally, Dallion laughed. Only an otherworlder would have come up with something like that a faithful recreation of an Earth toy made with what the awakened world had to offer. Both as a mage and a forger, Dallion was impressed at the skill and effort that had been put in creating such an artifact. He also acknowledged the waste. The creator could have single-handedly pulled out the world from its medieval level of development into modernity. And yet the person had chosen to forge a toy instead.

Are you up for it?

COUNT and ABLA TAMIN have invited you to their party.

Do you accept?

A purple rectangle flashed in front of Dallion. Before the fraction of time it took to disappear was over, he had already accepted twice.

Chapter 908: Magic Reversal

There was a certain degree of nostalgia fighting as a party. The first time it had happened, it was also against a dragon, if one could call a level four guardian that looked like one. Back then, Dallion had teamed up with Gloria to defeat the sand dragona seemingly undefeatable creature that used the desert terrain to its advantage. Aquilequia did no such thingshe didnt have to.

At any point, three of the dragons instances remained in different spots in the air. Each of them let out scales and fire, while also engaging in direct melee attacks with its wings and tail. Interestingly enough, unlike the younger dragons, Aquilequia never tried to use her teeth in combat.

Gripping a lance tightly with one hand, the giant metalin armor sped through the air, attempting to strike the great dragon. The devastating multi-attack struck the left side of Aquilequia, tearing off clusters of scales. Unfortunately, the moment that happened, the instance faded away, effectively negating the effects of the attack.

Damn it! Dallion hissed. His attempts to use force splitting on the creature had failed again. To make it even more annoying, it didnt seem that he was far off.

Ablas blade once more flew up from the ground, striking the head of the dragon. Despite all its power, though, the only thing it managed to achieve was a slight scar on the beasts eyelid.

Lux! Dallion summoned his bladebow. Hit and run! Constantly!

Yes, boss! the firebird chirped, as it propelled the weapon at the speed of sound.

The approach wasnt what Dallion initially had in mind. Originally, he had meant for Lux to use the bladebow to fire a bolt at such speed, but the current approach seemed even better.

Another ray of destruction pierced the sky, piercing through two instances of Aquilequia. Naturally, none of them became reality. On the positive side, that gave enough of an opening for the Count to engage the remaining one, finally injuring the dragons right arm.

A roar of pain and agony resounded as dragon blood was spilled for the very first time. It was more than a wound, shattering the concept of the dragons infallibility. Due to all the losses up to now, everyoneDallion includedregarded it as invincible. A direct wound proved that it was just another awakened monster.

More attacks followed from the ground. The few survivors had made use of all their artifacts, now targeting the dragon with whatever means they had. One shattered the ground he stood on, with the sole goal of creating rocks to haul against the monster. It was less effective than weapons, but when someone with a body trait of over ninety threw a rock, it had the same effect as a catapult.

The pain emanating from Aquilequia doubled as the dragon split into four instances. Each concentrated on a different target.

Taking advantage of the casting pause, Dallion did another spark infused spiral attack. The action was painful, causing his arm to go numb, as he suspected it would. What he didnt count on was Aquilequia choosing to take on the attack head on.

Scales burst, creating a pattern on the amber body. The beast ignored that, letting out a breath of fire forward.

Dallion had only a moment to decide. Thanks to his scholar skills, he could see a few instances that would avoid the flame. However, making them reality would also fade his recent attack.

Vih, expand! Dallion ordered, deciding to take the chance.

The shield blocked the torrent of flame, creating a cone of safety behind it. In the real world, its size merely doubled, but that was enough for Dallion to avoid serious damage. Sadly, the same couldnt be said for the item.

Thats it for me, Vihrogon said as drops of molten metal fell from the shields surface. It was a pleasure being with you. A bit stubborn, but all in all, not the worst owner a companion guardian could have.

Ill bring you back! Dallions heart tightened. He had assumed that the shield would manage to withstand one hit. Clearly, he was mistaken. Just like I did with Gleam.

Ill be waiting. Just try to add a bit more style to my new home.

Within Dallions personal realm, the dryads domain spontaneously exploded into flames, burning up to the ground.

Before him, the dragon split again. It was visible to the plain eye that the attacks against it were having an effect. Magic was no longer able to keep up, barely covering the patches resulting from the inflicted damage.

Combining music and magic, Dallion played a chord on his harpsisword, sending stands of purple all over the dragon. With the beasts aether layer weakened, they managed to grab hold. The moment they did, the instances faded away.

Can you force split? the Count shouted.

Can Ablā? Dallion asked, already seeing what the other was going for.

Enough, came the response from the ground.

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Two more of Aquilequias instances faded, leaving only the one near the ground. A new wave of fire covered the terrain, aiming to burn any and all enemies there. Dragon and human corpses alike were consumed by the flames, along with several survivors. The unfortunate members of the inner sanctum had made the same mistake Dallion had, assuming that their gear would withstand the attack.

All that managed to survive only did so because they were out of range of the flame blast.

We must do it now! the Count shouted.

Wait for her split, Dallion said. Then attack. We'll deal with the rest.

Out of all of them, the Counts armor had the greatest chance of success. Dallion and Alba just had to make sure that the attack took place.

Predictably, the dragon split into three instances. Apparently, maintaining four proved too much. Just as before, each of them picked a different target, engaging it with extreme aggressiveness.

Dont be foolish, dear boy, Adzorg said. You're doing good progress. Slow and steady wins the race.

Internally, Dallion could only smile. While the saying was mostly correct, it only held true as long as everything else remained the same. The dragon was wounded, but the people fighting it weren't much better. All three of the major attackers had suffered in one way or another. Not acting now would allow the dragon to pick them off one at a time, even at the price of potentially serious wounds.

With one swift action, Dallion brought all his weapons close to him, then returned them to his realm. His fingers moved at a frantic pace, starting another ray of destruction spell.

Within seconds, one of Aquilequias instances was less than a hundred feet away. Her massive head seemed to grin as she opened her mouth, sending a new torrent of fire. The same occurred in all three instances as well.

So, that's the choice you're giving us, Dallion thought. No matter what happened, one target was likely to die.

Just do it! The count used his living armor to thrust forward, lance at the ready.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion did. Time and reality stopped as the tug of war commenced. The dragon seemed to be focused on killing Ablā, but in no circumstances was willing to have anyone decide for it. In contrast, the duke and Dallion had put their lives on the line to avoid such an outcome.

Ablā joined in on Dallion's side, focusing on the instance in which the Count and Aquilequia clashed. Fire went over all humans, spreading the pain to their originals. Dallion didn't lose concentration. Ignoring the pain, he focused all his mental energy on forcing the reality he wanted.

Just a little more! He told himself.

The dragon kept pulling to its own choicethe death of Ablā and Tors. The strength of both sides was almost equal, each gaining a slight advantage only to lose it immediately after. The result was a toss of the coin. And then, Aquilequia made her fatal mistake. Instead of keeping at it, she changed target, switching to the reality in which Dallion would die. One could say that it was a good strategic choice, although the timing was off.

The single moment of hesitation during the switch allowed Dallion and Ablā to gain an advantage for their version of reality, and in the short amount of time remaining, the dragon wasn't able to compensate.

In the blink of the eye, the flames that went through Dallion and his companions on the ground vanished, along with the dragon itself. Only one instance remained and in it, Aquilequias flames melted off the Counts massive metalin armor, while he managed to thrust the tip of his lance into an area already weakened by Dallions spiral attacks.

The dragon twisted her head upwards, in a roar of agony and pain. Losing strength, the body was no longer able to maintain its weight in the sky. The creature reverted to the use of magic to compensate.

No, you dont! the Count shouted.

The top layers of the lance peeled off, revealing an entirely new weapon in its core; it was a weapon that Dallion instantly recognized, created for the sole purpose of draining magic from its target.

Mage killer, he thought.

Magic threads drained away, sucked into the lances core, leaving the massive body like water on glass. All the aether patches covering Aquilequia vanished, including the entire purple wing. Now, there wasnt anything left keeping her in the air.

Abla, Tors! Dallion shouted. Get out of there!

Both awakened followed his command, moving away from the dragon crashing down. The entire ground shook.

For a fraction of a second, a rectangle with the creatures health emerged, telling Dallion that finally he had won. Yet, the cost was considerate. A total of five people remained on the battleground: he, Abla, Tors, and one other survivor. In effect, one could say that the survivors were foureven with his metalin armor, there was no way that the Count would survive for long. Dallion could attempt a healing spell to make him last a bit longer, but he didnt want to risk breathing life back into the dragon.

Be careful! Giaccia said from Dallions domain.

Hardly had she done so when Aquilequias body started glowing. The orange skin and scales lit up as if they were made of light. For a moment, it seemed that the whole mass would explode in a ball of flame. It didnt, collapsing in upon itself.

Crap! Dallion said. He remembered what would follow from here. Being creatures of intense magic, killing them didnt just result in a simple death. The lesser dragons of the nest didnt have the critical mass of magic needed to reach such an effect, but Aquilequia had. Dragon shadow! he shouted, giving a chance for everyone else to prepare.

A single dot of orange light remained in the center of what had been the dragon. A split second later, it ballooned back out, yet instead of turning into a void being it transformed into an aether creature.

What happened? Dallion wondered, seeing a new smaller dragon emerge.

The being was closer to a dragonlet than an actual dragon, barely five times larger than Dallion himself. Smooth-skinned, and made entirely of aether, it flew from spot to spot with the speed of a lightning bolt.

What are you? Dallion summoned his harpsisword.

Surprised? Aquilequia asked, her anger replaced by unadulterated amusement. Moonstone dragons don't leave shadows. We transform into something completely different.

Moonstone dragons?

Our hearts are Moonstones. After my death, that's what I'll leave behind. The dragon darted towards Dallion, claws extended. Having reaction and perception traits over ninety, he was able to counter the attack with a new spiral strike, though the only thing that he achieved was to cause Aquilequia to swerve and avoid it. Assuming you manage to kill me.

I helped kill you once, Dallion said, using his music skills to probe the new form of the creature.

That was before. This time, there's no one to help you.

Chapter 909: The Betrayal

Dallion and Aquilequia flashed through the air like a pair of lightning bolts. The dragon remained marginally faster, but had decreased its ability to affect large areas. The flaming breath had become the equivalent of a point attack, taking out a handful of Dallion's instances at most. Aquilequia was fully aware of this, which was why her style of fighting had changed so dramatically.

Sparks of purple lightning ran over her entire body, like an armor of thorns, giving out a shock each time Dallion got close. His left arm was still suffering the consequences of a new permanent effect after he had attempted to pierce the dragon's wing.

Spark! He let out a spiral attack.

The distance between him and the dragon was less than ten feet, but even so, Aquilequia managed to evade the lethality of the blow, merely getting the tip of her wing shredded.

Damn it! Dallion hissed internally.

His opponent combined the speed and energy of a dragonlet with the cunning and power of an ancient dragon.

A sword flew from the ground; Abba was attempting to influence the battle, but due to his condition, his skills were lacking.

The dragon snorted, evading the flying projectile as if it were a static object. Dallion could have done the same, but chose a different approach. Releasing the aura sword in his left hand, he grabbed hold of Abba's weapon.

What's your level? He asked the item guardian directly.

Strong and arrogant, a purring male voice replied. I like you.

A dragonblade? Dallion wondered. Like everyone, he had heard the term, but up to now thought of it as highly unlikely. Thinking a bit more, it made sense that dragons would be precisely the type of guardians fit for top nobles. The only thing the creatures respected was strength, ensuring that anyone viewed as not worthy might come to a premature death at the hands of his own weapon.

I was over a hundred when I was first imprisoned, the item continued. That should be enough for you.

Yet again, Aquilequia flew by, casting an aether sphere around Dallion to limit his movements. Instinctively. He slashed at the purple material with both weapons. The force of the strike was enough to shatter the makeshift prison, although there was noticeable resistance on the dragonblades part.

Abla! Dallion shouted. Grant me permission to use your weapon!

Suddenly, the weapon felt a lot lighter.

What skills do you have? Dallion asked, filling the air with a series of line attacks.

Shapeshifting and permanent wounds should be enough for you

, the guardian said in his pleasantly sinister voice. There could be no doubt that this sword, too, was one of the Twelve Suns rare items.

You wont like the shock that comes with fighting her, Dallion said, filling his own voice with power. The worst thing that an owner could do to an arrogant item was leave any doubt as to who was boss.

I can handle it. Can you?

Dallion concentrated, extending his magic threads into the weapon. The dragonblade didnt fight it, transforming into a six-foot broadsword.

Bursting into a new set of instances, Dallion flew in the general direction of Aquilequia. Her speed and maneuverability made predicting her movements nearly impossible, but with a scattershot approach with close to two hundred instances, Dallion was able to get close enough for an attack.

Sword clashed with claws as both opponents grasped the opportunity to inflict as much damage to the other as possible.

Purple rectangles flashed by, briefly showing the damage both parties had received. Dallion, as expected, had gotten his left arm paralyzed all the way to the shoulder. Miraculously, that hadnt affect his grip. As for Aquilequia, she had received a bleeding wound, which in the present circumstances amounted to nothing at all; her entire body was made out of magic, and magic couldnt bleed. Or couldn it?

Gleam, teach Harp to perform illusions at your level, Dallion said within his realm.

Teach her? The shardfly asked in near terror. I dont think theres anything I can teach her.

Just show her how its done!

For what Dallion had in mind, hed need to be able to cast illusions using his harpissword, and he had to make certain that theyd hold.

In the real world, a single instant passed. Within Dallions realm, Giaccia had gone through an entire day of training to master the illusion ability of a spectral shardfly. Despite not being from another

world, her learning ability was superior to Dallions. The magic limitations, though, had forced her to become creative in the way she analyzed and applied the knowledge provided by Gleam.

Dallion, of course, didnt leave anything to chance. For several minutes he continued the cat-and-mouse game with Aquilequia, avoiding her attacks until the effect of the paralysis had worn off. Then, hed engage in a close battle, unleashing as much power of the dragonblade as it allowed.

Ready, Harp? Dallion asked.

Ready, the nymph replied, having taken the time to practice for weeks.

Here we go. Dallion prepared mentally. It was time for another sky clash, but this time hed be placing himself at much greater risk. A simple exchange of slashes wouldnt be enough; hed have to continue with the attack, striking Aquilequia several times in specific spots. As long as he timed it right and boosted his speed with enough spells, there was a good chance of success.

Chords of anxiety filled the air. Clusters of sound strands came from below, carrying with them condensed hatred and aggression. The emotions that had left Aquilequias body with her death now poured back in, filling her with the desire to scorch the entire world and everyone in it.

What the hell?! Twenty of Dallions instances looked down at the ground.

The source of the music, naturally, was Tors. Leave it to an egotistical narcissist to come to ones aid once the battle was almost over and mess everything up in the process. Completely useless ever since the start of the hunt, the Elazni was trying to make up for it by flooding the dragon with emotions in an effort to get it off balance.

Dallion had to admit that his cousin was more skilled than he was given credit for, but that didnt diminish the fact that he remained a complete idiot. With no one else left on the ground, he had just made a target out of himself and Abl.

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Must go. The dragonblade twisted out of Dallions grip, darting towards its owner. It was an interesting experience.

Shit! Dallion hissed beneath his breath. As disadvantageous as it was, the sword was the least of his issues. Of all the times it should have worked

Aquilequia let out a torrent of flames, fading several of Dallions instances. The rage placed within her compelled the creature to attack without any regard for her own life. Her head turned as she split into two instances of her own. The fight against Dallion had proved longer than she would have liked, even if she maintained a slight advantage. Meanwhile, there were two and a half people on the ground, all far weaker targets.

For close to a second, the instances circled one another, as the dragon decided on the next course of action. Then, the unthinkable happened instead of focusing on the only real opponent, Aquilequia swooped down towards the remaining survivors. The pent-up anger called for instant gratification, which would be quickly achieved once she burned Tors, Abl, and the one who had killed her.

Boosting his speed with several spells, Dallion darted at the nearby instance. Focusing with all his might, he tried to force it into reality, but this time, the dragon proved stronger, winning the tug of war. The version that Dallion had attacked vanished, while the true form of the dragon was on its way to deal with the others.

Lux! Dallion shouted. Boost me!

This wasn't something that Dallion would normally do, but right now his only choice was to go on with it and hope that his body trait was high enough to withstand the force.

Before anyone could blink, the firebird had moved the bladebow beneath Dallion's feet. An instant later, it propelled its owner forward, right after the dragon.

Layers of pressure stacked one over the other, first in Dallion's feet, then knees, then waist. His body instinctively wanted to bend, but he didn't let it, maintaining a stretched position as he split the air faster than ever before.

Beneath, Ablā had just caught his dragonblade.

Aquilequia snarled, then let out a torrent of fire.

Several things happened at once. Unable to run, Ablā transformed his weapon into a swordshield in an effort to withstand the flames. Meanwhile, Dallion had reached the back of the dragon and proceeded to unleash a multi attack with his harpsisword.

Dozens of strikes hit the dragon. Purple electricity ran up the blade, paralyzing Dallion's right arm to the point that he dropped his weapon. However, it no longer mattered. With each hit, the nymph had cast an illusion, changing the dragon's ethereal body into flesh. Tens of permanent bleed effects came into being all at once, spraying blood everywhere.

The dragon coiled upwards. A sensation of pain that wasn't supposed to exist made it twist in agony. One of the wings tore up mid-flight due to the dragon's speed. Flesh and bone were never meant to withstand such force.

At that moment Dallion felt the sense of victory. Just as he was about to strike the final blow, his empathy trait activated.

A memory fragment flashed before his eyes. It was brief, lasting far less than any fragment Dallion had seen so far, but Dallion was able to feel the pain and fear that had plagued Aquilequia's entire existence. For most of her life, she had no knowledge of the past, or that there even was a real world. All that she had done was roam the realm with several others like her. Every few centuries, clerics would come and take one of the dragons with them. Then, at one point, even they stopped visiting, leaving Aquilequia alone.

No! the dragon roared, ending the memory fragment. I won't let you!

Sorry. You don't have any choice. Dallion summoned the harpsisword in his left hand, then combined attack with music to strike the final blow.

A spiral attack dug into the dragon's wounded body, putting an end to the echo of its existence. Yet, it didn't come with pain. Rather, the opposite—the strands of music that Dallion had wrapped the attack with—emanated a sense of peace, destroying the emotion that Tors had inserted.

The roaring stopped. Aquilequia turned her head towards Dallion as much as she could, as if to say something. Alas, she never had the possibility. A bright orange glow surrounded the body, breaking Giaccias illusion. The outlines of the creature blurred, scattered by the wind until only a chunk of orange crystal remained, emanating the all too familiar energy of the Moons.

Dragon heart, Dallion muttered.

The shard was twice as large as a human head, shining in brilliant orange. It was the only remnant that proved Aquilequia had ever existed. In different circumstances, Dallion would have left it as it was, possibly even sending it to Dararr. Unfortunately, he already had plans for the Moonstone, as well as a few more loose ends.

Unsummoning Lux, Dallion changed the direction of his flight, going to where Aquilequia had initially crashed into the ground.

Count, he said, landing next to the hunter. Healing magic had done little to fix his wounds.

Did we win? the old man found the strength to ask.

Yes, Dallion replied. We won. Splitting into instances, he looked back to check how the duke was doing. Abba is alive. A bit scorched, but alive.

Good. The Count closed his eyes. Hell of a way to go, he said.

Hell of a way. Dallion forced a smile.

Your grandfather used to say that a lot.

The sentence shot through Dallion like lightning. The Count knew his grandfather?

Theyll kill me for telling you this, but Im dying anyway, so theres nothing they can do. The hunter let out a dry laugh mixed with coughing.

Where do you know him from?

From the Order. Your grandfather was part of the inner sanctum back when I was still a newbie. He was the bishop of the Twelve Suns, first after the Emperor before the change.

What change?

Sorry, kid the vow wont let me tell you

Part of Dallion wanted to continue with the questions for as long as possible. Finally, he had found someone willing to talk about his grandfather, and the man was at deaths door.

Desperately, Dallion cast a dozen more healing spells in a futile attempt to stabilize the Counts condition for an hour longer. There was no point. The old man was content to have done his duty, letting go of what little kept him clinging to life.

You didnt deserve this, Count. Dallion told himself as he played the chords of a heroic saga on his harpsisword. Music full of calm and joy flowed into the hunter, making the last few moments of his life a lot more bearable. Several seconds later, he stoppedthere was no need to continue.

Adzorg, Dallion said within his realm. Was this all worth it?

The whole inner sanctum had been obliterated. Awakened who could take on nymph water islands now lay dead in the forbidden north, killed by a dragon that only wished to escape its prison. The dragon had proved very costly to the empire, not to mention pointless. The great dragon would have remained imprisoned without their involvement. Possibly the smaller feral creatures might have become an issue at some point, but they could have easily been dealt with without suffering such losses.

I honestly dont know, dear boy, the mage replied. Youve gained a lot of experience, as well as a Moonstone. Not to mention that you saved Ablas life. All in all, Id consider the hunt a personal win.

Dallion didnt see it that way. If only he had a little more information, so much of this could have been avoided.

With a flick of his wrist, Dallion returned the Moonstone and harpsisword to his realm.

I cant believe we did it, Tors said as he approached, a fraction of composure returning to his voice. When it changed to an aether creature, I was worried it might

Faster than a lightning bolt, Dallion dashed to his cousin and gripped him by the throat. He had easily spotted the others attempt at using music skills on him. That, combined with his previous behavior, led to only one conclusion.

Youre one of them, arent you? Dallion tightened his grip as Tors struggled to break free. His strength was considerable, but compared to Dallion, he felt no stronger than a month-old kitten. Who ordered Abba dead?

I tors gasped for air. I didnt try to kill Abba he managed to say.

Youve been causing problems ever since we entered the north. At first, I thought it was due to your incompetence, but it wasnt, was it? You just wanted to create an opportunity to act. That last music attack proved it.

No I just

I couldnt manage anything of the sort, but you did. And not only that, you were able to fill up the dragon with the one emotion that would make it blindly charge at the duke. If I hadnt managed to

You! Tors said as loud as he could. kill you!

Dallion loosened his grip just a fraction, constantly on guard in case the Elazni tried to attack with music skills again.

I tried to kill you, his cousin repeated. On orders from the emperor himself.

Chapter 910: Cold War Declaration

Me? The concept seemed incomprehensible, mostly because the emperor could have easily done so any number of times. There was no rule against it as far as Dallion knew.

Youre surprised? Even while held by the throat, Tors managed to smirk. You grew too fast, made a deal with the Order of the Seven Moons and took control of the Alliance.

From that point of view, the emperors gears made sense, if it wasnt for the small detail regarding order of events. Dallion had made a deal with the archbishop back when the Order and the emperor maintained good relations. As for Eury, their union had taken place after the dragon had been sighted. Unless the whole hunt was nothing but a pretext for Tamin to kill off everyone who could challenge him within the empire.

Who else is after me? Dallion squeezed harder.

I dont know! The emperor called me! The Elazni struggled, holding on to Dallions arm with both hands. Archduke! He promised hed make me archduke.

That much was clear. There was no other way for someone with Tors competency to earn the title otherwise.

All I had to do was make it that you die. The dragon didnt matter.

Sleep! Dallion ordered. The overwhelming presence of his music skills, combined with his grip round Tors throat, quickly made his cousin to lose consciousness.

There was no reason to leave him alive. Anyone in Dallions position would have killed off the threat here and now. Still, for better or worse, he had made a promise to Duchess Elazni. He was going to see to it that her great-grandson made it back alive.

Leaving the unconscious noble to the ground, Dallion walked to Ablā. The duke had seen better days, his armor covered with blood and scorch marks. Only the dragonblade remained in a flawless state, its surface gleaming, apparently immune to dragon fire.

You heard that, right? Dallion asked.

The duke looked at him.

Whats your level? Your real level.

Over a hundred and twenty, Dallion replied. Killing the great dragon had earned him a new achievement, though not as generous as he had hoped.

You say it as if its nothing. The emperor was right to fear you. Otherworlders are a different breed.

That was true. Things might well have been different. Dallion always knew that sooner or later hed have to clash with the emperor, but this made it personal. Now he had no choice but to take matters further.

Call the rest of your Order, he said loud enough so that Tors could hear as well. Take Tors with you and return to the capital. Claim the glory for wiping out the nest. When the ceremony is over and youre called to have an audience with the emperor, tell him that its over. The next time he goes after me, Im striking back and will rip the Tamin Empire in two.

Not once did Dallion raise his voice, but the threat was obvious. War had been declared. Because of the nymph threat, Dallion was willing to create the impression that everything was fine something the imperial capital had done for years. However, he had his limits and, at present, the strength to do something about it.

For a moment Dallion hesitated whether to summon the Moonstone from his realm and break off for Ablā. After everything that the noble had been through, he deserved at least as much. Yet,

everything given to the empire would sooner or later make its way to the emperor. It was said that only the strong could afford to have principles, so could Dallion afford to keep them?

Dallion extended his arm. The large crystal emerged in it. Without any effort, he broke off a small fragment and tossed it to Ablā.

For the inner sanctum, he said, then glanced at Tors. Except him.

Not waiting for a reaction, Dallion cast a new flight spell, zooming into the sky. The Moonstone was back within his realm, bathing it in orange light.

Veil, Dallion said. Sent a message to the Order.

Which one? The overseer asked.

The Seven Moons. Tell them I want to see the archbishop. In person.

Huh? Why not? The last time an archbishop met, a few hundred sagas were composed to mark the occasion. That was back during the coronation of the second emperor, or maybe the third.

Tell him that Ill bring him a Moonstone.

Some could call this an attempt at a bribe. They would be very much right. From Giaccias memory fragment, Dallion had seen how appreciative the Order was of Moonstones, especially large ones. The treasures were somehow involved in the creation of awakening shrines, and likely a lot more. There was bound to be a positive reaction to the offer, and if not, Dallion had an idea of the grand citadels approximate location.

I guess thats the last well be talking, dear boy, a saddened Adzorg said. I suspect the emperor is already aware of your declaration of war.

Its not a declaration of war. At least, for now, it wasnt. And I intend to get you.

No doubt, but might I suggest one thing before you continue down your path of suicidal conquest? Maybe bring back Vihrogon while you have a chance.

I will. For now, I want you to make a Moon vow not to share anything regarding me to anyone.

Youre putting me in a very difficult position. How does one choose between a mentor and an apprentice?

A difficult question, and one Dallion was glad he didnt have to make.

I vow not to tell either of you anything about the other. The old mage reached a compromise. That should be fair.

You sly old fox, Dallion thought. That way, Adzorg got to enjoy the best of both worlds, at least until it came to actual clashes.

The barren, moss-covered terrain continued all the way to the horizon. Hours passed without change, and no response from the Order of the Seven Moons. Maybe Dallion was indeed a bit too optimistic that they would respond.

One by one, clouds formed in the distance. All of them were white, so that wasn't a matter of concern. Natural clouds tended to be abundant this far north, even if the imperial furies constantly and persistently removed them from the capital's skies. In a few minutes, the first signs of anomalous behavior were noticed. All the clouds, large and small, tended to float in one specific direction regardless of the wind towards the imperial capital.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

He's barricading the city, Dallion thought.

There was a chance that all this was a reaction to the war, but the timing was too perfect.

Adzorg, I know you vowed not to tell me anything about the emperor, but is there a reason for him to be afraid of me?

As expected, there was no answer.

When it came to traits and equipment, Emperor Tamin clearly had the upper hand. Could it be that there was more about the awakening level than Dallion knew? Given his victory against the dragon, he was tempted to outright attack the distant cloud forts.

No, Dallion thought. He'd have the option after he saw where he stood with the Order. There was a non-zero chance that new alliances might have to be formed, and Dallion didn't want to burn all his bridges just yet.

Veil, Dallion said as he turned to the east. Any news?

I'll tell you what Eury told me, the overseer replied. You'll know when I know.

So, that's how they want to play.

I know you consider yourself in their good books, but they've got a habit of ignoring nobility. For all we know, they might have agreed to it, but it'll be days before some cleric finally decides to convey their message.

We'll see about that.

Dallion flew straight down to the ground. Already familiar with the costs and benefits of random domain creation, he knew the pointlessness of establishing a settlement here, or all places. What he had also come to know was that the land of a domain was by far its least benefit.

REALM CREATION

Name the Land you wish to create.

North Point, he said.

You have created the Land of NORTH POINT Level 1.

You have full control of the Land of NORTH POINT.

A reflex dragon has been made the land's guardian.

Defeat the guardian to change the land's destiny.

The guardian choice was only slightly ironic, although, given the location, maybe it was normal.

The creature was male which excluded Aquilequia and roughly the same size as Dark when Dallion had met the dragonlet for the first time.

PATRONS INFLUENCE

(+5 Empathy)

You're the first to create a realm in the north, expanding the influence of your patron Moon. Score for the Green team!

EMBRACE OF FATE

(+2 Empathy)

Your empathic nature has attracted the interest of one of the former inhabitants of the area. Keep in mind that dragons are like cats they tend to mess things up if you stop paying attention.

The achievements were a welcome surprise. At his current level, Dallion didn't expect for there to be any left. Accepting them graciously, he waved through the green rectangles, then focused on what he really had in mind. Since the emperor had made the first move, retaining a presence in the capital was no longer warranted.

Reaching out, Dallion grabbed hold of his mansion in the capital and pulled it out. Naturally, he checked to make sure that Taem or the usual gathering of leeches wasn't there. From the point of view of the local inhabitants, it seemed like the building had vanished even more abruptly than it had appeared, leaving an empty lot behind. Inevitably, there would be days of gossip on the matter, but Duchess Elazni and the emperor were going to see to it that all uncomfortable topics were quickly erased from everyone's consciousness.

Initially, Dallion had planned to move the building directly to Alliance, then destroy the temporary settlement he had created. After receiving the achievements, he felt compelled to have both remain here. A lone house in a flat moss-covered wilderness was the stuff of horror movies, but it could also prove useful in the long term.

Flash, Dallion addressed the dragon guardian, granting him a name. Take good care of this place.

The dragon coiled up on the ground, just like a cat would if a cat had the same scaly features.

Ready to gain a few levels?

The instant the question was asked, the dragon flashed into action. Before any red rectangle could appear, it had extended its neck, aiming to bite Dallion's head off.

The response was even faster. Without the use of weapons, Dallion punched the dragon in the forehead with a spark infused point attack, causing the creature to dissolve into a cloud of orange particles, before reappearing again.

COMBAT INITIATED

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

Two red rectangles emerged, catching up to events. They were followed by another marking the realms improvement to level 2.

Nice, Dallion said with the semblance of a smile. You have initiative.

Three more clashes followed, each sharing the same outcome. Eager to earn its win, the dragonlet kept attacking several more times with no effect, until Dallion ordered it to stop. Even if only a moment would pass in the real world, this was no time for fun and games.

Just stay here and protect the house, Dallion said, petting the underbelly of the now larger creature. There will be time for more later.

Spoilsport, Flash grumbled, then flew off to the mountain that represented the mansion within the realm.

Dallion suppressed the chuckle as he examined all the monasteries that had been recently given to him. Each had a substantial number of people, though only one held an actual bishop.

In the span of a moment, Dallion moved from the forbidden north to a wooden settlement in the eastern forest. His arrival was marked with a minor scare as he emerged within the monasterys main prayer hall. Dozens of acolytes jumped to their feet, their emotions ranging between fear of attack and hope that one of the Moons had made an appearance in person.

Im going to see the archbishop! Dallion said in a voice brimming with authority. His focus was a tall thin man in cyan robes, standing right next to an awakening altar. And youll tell me how to get there.

Of course, Count Dallion. The man turned around with the confidence of an imperial tax collector. A ship is waiting for you on the eastern coast. Ill lead you to it right after the service is over.

A ship? Dallion didnt like the sound of that.

Not what you expected, Im sure, but the safest way to travel, despite the current tensions. Youve nothing to worry about. The archbishop has foreseen you reaching the grand citadel safely, just as he foresaw you coming here.