

Leveling up 911

Chapter 911: Journey to Ivory Tower

The worst thing about prophecies was that one could never be sure whether they were real or not. Up till now, the archbishop was right about a lot of things, but Dallion would be lying if he didn't see a few discrepancies as well. Given the vast presence of the Order and their many unbanished copyettes, it was easy to assume that a lot of the information had nothing to do with clairvoyance, but relied on good, solid information. The problem was that the Order excelled in other areas as well.

De-levelling was just one such example. Even high nobles of the imperial capital were incapable of performing the curse, having to rely on clerics to do it for them. If that were the case for curses, who was to say that their prophecies weren't real?

The ship waiting for Dallion was a small two-masted vessel anchored in a cove on the eastern coast of the continent. Normally, Dallion would consider any travel by sea unreasonably dangerous, but the bishop accompanying him insisted that flying was out of the question. At Dallion's present level, it didn't matter much. At the first sign of danger, he could cast a spell and be in the sky before even a lightning bolt could reach him.

How long will it take us to get there? Dallion asked, examining the deck of the ship.

Despite the hundreds of item guardians present, not a single one responded to his greetings. Any other time, they would be yelling one over the other just to have a chance to talk to someone with the empathy trait. It seemed that the Order had learned from its previous mistakes and was running a very tight ship.

Not long, the bishop replied in the vaguest terms possible. We just need to make sure that everything is ready for your visit.

What does that mean, exactly?

The bishop merely smiled and went to have a few words with the ship's captain. Meanwhile, Dallion took the time to examine the crew aboard.

Despite wearing common sailor clothes, Dallion could tell that they were experienced battle clerics. All of them, without exception, were level eighty; many had traits even higher. Anyone having the misfortune of attacking the vessel would quickly regret the error of his ways. Yet, even this group alone wouldn't stand a chance against a water island.

Are there other guests aboard? Dallion addressed one of the clerics.

The man looked at him for a few seconds, then went back to scrubbing the deck. If there were any answers to be given, it wouldn't be by him or anyone else of the crew.

Eury says going there is a bad idea. Veil made his opinion known from Dallion's realm. I think she's right.

You were wrong before, Dallion noted. With the emperor against us, it's not like we have a choice. How's recruiting?

Slow. The furies have picked up, but they refuse to live in Alliance. Hunters continue to trickle in, but its not like there were many of them to begin with.

That was to be expected. All things considered, Dallion expected that all hunters and Mirror Pool members who were interested in joining him had already done so. The furies were a different matter, though with many of them belonging to the empire to begin with, it was unrealistic to expect they would keep flying in forever.

Are you sure you want to rely on the Order? Unease emanated from the overseer. Theyll probably back you, but their help always comes at a price and once they grab hold, they dont let go.

I know. I learned that lesson in one of my awakening trials.

Well, I saw it in real life. Dharma's become unrecognizable. Technically, after the Orders generous gift its your domain now, but the Order has such a heavy presence they might as well be running the place.

Ive learned my lesson, Dallion repeated.

The bishop ended his conversation with the captain. Two points of interest were that it had been deliberately kept as quiet as possible to prevent Dallion from listening in, and also was in a language that he had never heard before.

Everything is set, the man said. Youll be leaving in a few minutes.

I thought youd be coming with me.

Only to the ship. Im not allowed further.

Even bishops werent allowed in the grand citadel? If Dallion didnt know better, hed think that the entire concept of the Order was a scam. For such a large and powerful organization, it was curious that its seat of power was kept isolated from everyone, even bishops, by the sound of it.

By the Seven, may you find the answers youre looking for. The bishop bowed slightly, then quickly left.

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As promised, the ship set sail less than a minute later. The crew's hands raised the sails to catch what little wind there was. Dallion offered to cast a spell, but was met with silent resistance. In the past, he would have accepted it as part of life. Right now, though, he was in a hurry.

I can fly the ship anywhere in the world. He approached the captain. Just tell me the direction. Itll be a lot faster.

It wont, the large bearded man said, not taking his eyes off the horizon. There was no anger or annoyance emanating from him, just calm and a touch of pity.

Why are you so sure?

At the question, the captain glanced sideways at Dallion.

I know about your skills and your level, he said. You're well over a hundred, with enough magic experience to obliterate armies. But nothing you do will make the ship faster for one simple reason.

Dallion crossed his arms, eager to hear the explanation.

Were not the ones moving it.

Just as he said that, the world around the ship sped by. For a fraction of a second, Dallion was able to see the thin outlines of a domain. Covering the entire vessel like a thin layer of film, they allowed the owner to transport it, just like any domain ruler would move settlements throughout the wilderness.

You linked the ship to your realm, didn't you? Dallion thought as he looked at the massive island that had replaced the continental coast. It was stern and majestic, made entirely of white rocks and nearly no vegetation. Waves splashed on chalk white sands, as a pier of white marble extended into the sea.

Welcome to Ivory Tower, the captain said. The path will lead you to the grand citadel.

I see. Thanks for the trip, then. He took a single leap onto the pier. As he did, he could see from the corner of his eyes the ship vanish, pulled away into infinity. For some reason the archbishop wasn't keen on him leaving.

Welcome, empath visitor, an item guardian greeted Dallion. You are expected. Please continue along the path without using magic.

What would happen if I do?

Nothing. It's just not polite, and you won't be able to admire the majesty of the island.

I didn't come here to sightsee.

That's what I said when I came to visit. Life is always full of problems that seem a lot more important, only they aren't. Spending a few minutes won't change anything in the grand scheme of things. If they did, coming here at all was already a waste of time.

An interesting concept, and remarkably true. One could almost feel that this was the conclusion of an awakening trial. Of greater concern was that the guardian claimed to have been a visitor at one point.

You were a visitor? Dallion looked at the tile.

All guardians on the island were visitors at one point.

Are you human?

There was no immediate response.

You're human.

I dedicated myself to the Order and was blessed with the task of protecting it against the void and all that would try to hurt us. You've seen the vortex guardians, I'm just like them, just not deemed worthy enough to be among their ranks.

Cold chills ran down Dallions spine. The visit was off to a terrible start. Hed only taken one step on the island and already hed found that the Order had banished humans into the awakened realms of items. It wasnt just the archbishops power that was worrying, but rather the notion that hed be willing to do it in the first place. If one could argue that the vortex guardians were necessary to keep the world from getting destroyed, what purpose could banishing volunteers to items have? Was that the reason that no one set foot on the island?

Casting a quick spell, Dallion rose a few inches from the ground.

If the archbishop is what he claims to be, hed have expected me to be rude, he said, floating forward.

The path of giant tiles continued through the beach and into the surrounding rocky area. There wasnt a plant or animal to be seen, only distant sounds and the faint smell of grass and vegetation. To the untrained eye, it would almost seem that the place had been abandoned for centuries; that was, until one paid careful attention to the one thing missing: cracks. Everything from the marble tiles to the massive rocks and mountains was in pristine condition. This couldnt be achieved by accident. Someone had to have meticulously visited every area and item realm to remove all cracklings in the making.

The path turned, venturing into a rock cave. Even before entering, Dallion could see that its entire walls were covered with light crystals, making it almost appear like a fake plastic prop. Even now, his mind struggled to accept that something so perfect could be real.

Be on guard, Dallion warned the companions and guardians within his realm.

The brightly lit tunnel continued for another two hundred feet, turning and twisting as it went along, until it led to the most extraordinary sight imaginable.

Holy heck, Dallion muttered.

There was a time when he had been impressed by emperor Tamins garden. What stood before him put all that to shame. Plants of all shapes, sizes, and colors filled the vast space between the circle of mountains. Orange bushes surrounded purple palm trees thirty feet tall, let out a bouquet of fragrances that simultaneously affected the senses and the mood. Dallion was able to see the faint strands of music linked to the pollen.

Herbology and music, he said, instinctively shredding the music strands before they reached him. If someone could combine those two skills together, they could easily add something else as well.

A large white structure rose in the distance. Despite its impressive design, it was smaller than many of the cathedrals Dallion had seen. The architecture combined elements of medieval and futuristic elements, creating something that would be at home in art books.

As Dallion made his way to the main entrance, plants moved out of the way, baring the ground below. Possibly it was meant to be welcoming, but it had the exact opposite effect, giving Dallion the feeling that the place rejected his presence.

When he got ten feet away, the ivory white doors opened, allowing someone to step outside. The person appeared in his late teens, slenderalmost skinny evenwith curly red hair and an almost bronze colored skin. Back on Earth, Dallion would have assumed he came from somewhere in Europe and in all likelihood, he did. Despite the short robes bearing the emblem of the Order, the

pair of modern Earth glasses was a dead giveaway, as was the otherworldly shimmering surrounding the boy.

Hey, Dal, the archbishop said. Nice to finally meet.

Chapter 912: Archbishop of the Seven Moons

Thats the archbishop?

The boy wasnt even hiding his level, allowing Dallion to see all his skills and traits. Then again, maybe there was a reason for that. His awakening level was greater than Dallions by seven and his mind trait was close to fifty percent more at an eye-watering one hundred and forty-nine. Just like Dallion, he had all twelve skills at a hundred, and all seven traits. The archbishops magic was abnormally low, barely in the low fifties, but other than that, he could be said to be the most powerful awakened in the world.

Surprised? the archbishop asked.

Only someone from Earth would come up with the name ivory tower, Dallion said. Why the glasses? With your level of perception, you shouldnt need them.

Everyone has their curses. Youve been through a few, I see. The boy reached towards Dallion. Cyan blue magic threads emerged from his fingers gently floating forward.

Dallion resisted the urge to flee or slice the threads as he normally would. Deep inside, he knew that to be a tactical mistake, yet he had a feeling that nothing bad would happen to him. As the threads wrapped around his body, he was proven right.

PERMANENT EFFECT REMOVED

You no longer suffer the effects of BLEEDING.

PERMANENT EFFECT REMOVED

You no longer suffer the effects of BLEEDING.

PERMANENT EFFECT REMOVED

You no longer suffer the effects of PARALYSIS.

Red rectangles flashed before his eyes.

Youd have dealt with them on your own in time, the archbishop said, pulling back his magic threads. To answer your question, thats what happens when we overdo it. It takes a lot to see into the future, and just like splitting, theres only a partial guarantee that things would end up the way you see.

So, your prophecies really are true Dallion felt as if he had been kicked in the guts.

You can have future visions as well. Any awakened can. Its more pronounced with otherworlders, but not exclusive as long as you can maintain it. I was lucky to get it upon my awakening and even luckier to be born in a time when the inhabitants of this world were more understanding. Interested in the secret? Ill gladly tell you.

This sounded far too much like a trick question for Dallion to respond.

Of course, you'll have to use up the Moonstones you've obtained so far.

Yeah, right, Dallion thought. He had used Moonstones in battle, so he knew precisely how powerful they could be. Needing to waste them all just for a glimpse into a future, that by the archbishops own words wasn't certain, sounded like a terrible deal.

Why? he asked.

Why? the archbishop repeated the question.

Why all the plots? Why all the games? Why the copyettes? Why have the Order constantly build monasteries all over the world, yet never taking control? At your level, you must have controlled more than half the world. The smile on the others face made him pause. You still control over half the world, yet you don't do anything with it.

And what do you think I should do? Rule like Tamin? Conquer the world like Tiallia? One of my copyettes already told you that's never been the point. All I want is for the world, this world, to last forever. Only two things threaten that. One the boy raised the index finger of his left hand the void manages to devour it. And two he raised a second finger someone conquers the world and challenges the Moons. Just like the Architect did.

You know about the Architect. Dallion swallowed.

I know everything the Order knows. The boy laughed. All the knowledge gathered throughout the millennia, from the creation of the eternal city all the way to today, is safely stored in the building next to us.

The claim verged on boasting, but it could be done. It would require millions of tomes and scrolls of knowledge, stored in thousands of library items within the grand citadel. Even without any awakening powers, the knowledge alone was enough to make anyone the greatest force in the world.

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Dallion was more than certain that information about the Stars technology could also be found there. Forbidden to the masses, it would provide a huge advantage to those who knew what to make of it. Metalins, bladerers, living armors, the imperial rockets, even computers created using the forbidden knowledge within these walls, and best of all here it wasn't forbidden. Neither the clerics nor any noble would do anything about it, because they were in the heart of the Order, a place only reachable by invitation.

You're welcome to take a peek if you want. As my guest, you're welcome to everything on the island.

And I won't end up like the other visitors?

The archbishop shook his head.

I doubt you have the necessary devotion. If you had accepted my offer and joined the Order before passing the fifth gate, who knows? He shrugged. But even then, I doubt it. You're an Earthling, just like me. There's so few of us now that we must stick together, especially with the world at risk.

Several of the nearby bushes slowly crawled towards the boy. Finding it amusing, he reached out, petting them as if they were domesticated animals. The behavior was very similar to that of Emperor Tamin, yet there was no telling who was copying who. If levels alone were to be considered, the archbishops was a lot higher. At the same time, the emperor had been strong enough to cast out all the clerics from the capital without response.

Why are you sure that whoever passes the next gate will destroy the world? Dallion asked, somewhat regaining his cool. A lot of good things came from the Architect.

A lot of bad things came as well, the other countered. But let's assume that you're right. Even if nothing but joy, mirth, and goodness came from the Architect's actions, what's left of the world before that?

They got banished?

The colossi were banished, but were they part of the previous world? Even I can't tell you that, and it's because time itself only starts with the creation of a world. Even the Architect couldn't change that. If he could, he'd have left at least a memento of some sort.

It was an irrefutable claim. The memory fragment Dallion had glimpsed which showed that time period was through the eyes of the Purple Moons familiar. Conveniently, the creature had been born at the start of the new era. Did that prove anything with certainty, though? Just like the archbishops' prophecies, a lot was left to interpretation.

You want to kill the emperor. Dallion came to the conclusion. But you can't. If the empire falls, Tiallia would achieve what you're trying to prevent.

Something like that. The boy kept on petting the gathered bushes.

Why not just replace him? You have copyettes.

It has been tried.

Dallion's eyes widened as he stared at the archbishop.

Centuries ago. Back then, the empire was a lot weaker than it was now. I had seen the potential danger in a prophecy, so I decided to step in and take matters into my own hands. Unfortunately, the attempt failed. The ones I put my trust in proved less capable than expected. The emperor survived with his life and issued me an ultimatum: I don't meddle with him or his heirs, and he won't try to take over the world.

A perfect stalemate.

Yes, but only as long as no external factors came into play. Your beloved mentor changed all that when he created that doomsday abomination of his. A single flash of regret emanated from the archbishop. It forced me to divert my attention from the emperor to stop the void. Meanwhile, Tamin took advantage of the situation and started a series of conflicts, leading to where we are today.

The problem with the explanation was that it might well turn out to be the truth, just as it could be the most intricate conspiracy theory ever. The Stars attack on Nerosal, the death of a member of the imperial family, the poison plague that and dozens more world-shattering events could have been caused with the sole purpose of providing a pretext for the emperor to take over the world. Naturally, it was just as possible that the archbishop was full of crap.

Dallion took another look at the cathedral door. It was obvious what was being asked of himhe knew that much even before coming to the islandbut now that it had come to it, his determination had waned.

Are you so eager to protect the man who slaughtered the greatest awakened of his own empire out of fear that they might one day replace him?

You could have saved them as well, but you didnt, Dallion countered. Now you want me to do your dirty work for you.

The bushes suddenly scattered away, along with any plants in the immediate vicinity.

Careful, Giaccia told Dallion.

The archbishop straightened up, then calmly removed his glasses and started to clean them with the sleeve of his robe.

Just as before, its ultimately your choice, the boy said. Youve done me more than enough favors, so if you dont want to be involved, I wont force you. Of course, you wont be able to count on my support, either. A smile returned to his face. But you already knew that.

Dallion did, but he also hadnt expected such a turn of events. There was no telling how old the archbishop was, but his plans spanned throughout centuries. In many ways, the closest thing he could compare him to was the general No, a weird mix between the emperor and the general, making him far more dangerous than either. If it came to an open battle, Dallion had a large chance of losing.

Tell you what. How about you take a while to think it over? The archbishop put his glasses back on and started walking towards a nearby palm tree. As he did, the plants cautiously approached back again, like puppies after being threatened with punishment. Explore the island, check out the citadel, seek out any information you wish. A day or two isnt significant in the grand scheme of things. If after that you still want to part ways, Ill send you back to Alliance.

What about the nymphs? Dallion voiced his other concern. Once youve dealt with the emperor, whos going to stop them?

We are, of course. With a new emperor, that will make the new balance of power three against one. Tiallia could be a bit wild, but shes not suicidal. As long as the status quo is maintained, Im willing to accept a cold war lasting a few centuries. By then, Ill have come up with an adequate solution.

It remained a wonder that the boy had as much empathy as he had. If Dallion hadnt seen it with his own eyes, hed guess he was talking to a mage. The cold-heartedness, even if it were for the good of the world, was outright terrifying. Maybe that was the reason he had isolated himself from everyone. With other people around, he would feel the consequences of his actions. Without them, he could spend all his time in his ivory tower viewing people as pieces on a chessboard.

Harp, when you made a deal with the Order, what was the price? He asked within his realm.

I dont know, the nymph replied. Tiallia never told me any details. She was convinced that she had made the right choice.

So were all the world conquerors, and look what happened to them.

Hesitating a minute more, Dallion finally took a step towards the citadel.

Just one thing, the archbishop suddenly said. You offered something when you demanded to see me. Its only right that you dont go back on your word.

A promise? The brief conversation had made Dallion completely forget about the dragon heart.

Casting a quick spell, he summoned the Moonstone out of his realm. Divine light radiated from it, attracting all plants towards it, like an empathy magnet. An atmosphere of bliss and serenity emerged, only to fade away once Dallion broke the heart in two.

One Moonstone piece, he said, leaving the larger half on the front step of the grand citadel. The rest is for me.

Chapter 913: Realm of the Grand Citadel

AREA AWAKENING

Reality shifted, causing the otherwise large building to grow even more, to the point it encompassed a world. Columns the size of towers rose all the way to the clouds, where more structures formed. Fields and forests spread to the horizon like a giant carpet, interrupted by structure-like mountains and mile-tall statues.

You are in the land of GRAND CITADEL

The lands destiny has been fulfilled.

Fulfilled? That meant that the realms ultimate level had been reached. Dallion knew that many things in the world had finite levels, but for an area to reach its cap, it must have been improved hundreds of times.

Thousands of stars sparkled above on a sky that was both sky and ceiling.

Welcome, visitor. a human made of purple light emerged a few feet away from Dallion. Welcome to the Grand Citadel. I am Xelenius Bran and will be your guide.

The entity was dressed in a set of clothes that mirrored the epitome of high European fashion of the late Renaissance, from the buckled shoes to the ruff and funny hat.

GRAND CITADEL PROTECTOR - XELENIOUS BRAN

Species: HUMAN

Class: MAGIC

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY 70**
- **MIND 90**
- **REACTION 64**
- **PERCEPTION 57**
- **MAGIC 42**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **ACROBATICS**
- **SCHOLAR**
- **ARTS**
- **SPELLCRAFT**

Weakness: NONE

A protector? Dallion wondered, looking at the entity's rectangle. Apparently, the archbishop was beyond using echoes for guides and caretakers.

How can you guide me? Dallion asked.

I can direct you to all the knowledge stored within the citadel. The realm is vast and connected to thousands of other realms, all focused on various fields. A single eternity won't be enough to explore everything there is.

Then how do you know?

I am only familiar with a small section of the realm. Besides, I have spent more than one eternity within these walls. Xelenius let out an annoying chuckle.

Another human voluntarily banished to be a servant of the Order.

Where can I learn more about the Architect? Dallion asked.

The citadel has a vast number of architectural styles, including the fabled one of Earth. The protector turned around in the direction of a distant mountain. As he did, the giant structure quickly approached, as if someone had pulled it to their current location. The protector of that library will guide you in

Not architecture, Dallion interrupted. I want to know more about the Architect, the person who created the world.

Xelenius blinked. Dallion could feel the confusion emanating from him.

The Seven Moons created the world, he said after a few seconds of hesitation.

Only Seven Moons? For someone who boasted that the citadel contained all knowledge, there were a few vital but glaring omissions. Regardless if they were true or not, Dallion had seen and heard several theories regarding the Eight Moon and the Architect. The only reason for them to be absent was if the archbishop had deliberately purged the information. Why would he, though?

What about the Crippled Star?

The mountain structure instantly zoomed away, replaced by a new one.

All known information regarding the fourteen major Stars and all the minor ones, the protector said with a note of disgust. I would recommend not reading them. The tomes only contain sad tales of corruption and desperation.

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At least thats here. Dallion felt mildly curious to see the archbishops prophecies on the matter. One was yet to emerge, if he was to be believed and since it wasnt Adzorg or the Emperor, there was no telling who it might end up being.

Do you have forging blueprints?

Yet again, the mountain was switched with a new one.

Everything from common items to masterpiece weapons, the guide said. The smile was still on his face, but his inner emotions let Dallion know that he was getting tired of the persistent indecision.

Does that include living armor?

Living armor, missiles, Earthbound weapons. I must warn you that the creation process is rather dangerous and requires vast amounts of awakened resources.

I know. Dallion said, walking past the protector. Ill tell you when I want something else.

The main reason Dallion wanted to check that out wasnt because he wanted to increase his knowledge although there was that too but because he needed to see what he was up against. With someone as self-confident as the archbishop, there was every chance that he had left everything on display to demonstrate his power.

More importantly, the instant spent in the awakened realm of the citadel gave Dallion time to think about how to proceed. Whatever the real reason was, the archbishop refused to attack anyone directly, despite having the overwhelming advantage of foresight. For that reason, he needed Dallion as an ally.

One potential possibility was for him to be bound by a Moon vow or promise to the deities. Back when Dallion had to repay Felygns boon, a number of things were out of bounds. Who was to say that the archbishop hadnt received his clairvoyance, and that was part of the price?

What do you think, Harp? Dallion mentally asked. Can the archbishop simply be a coward?

No, the nymph replied. Cowards dont become domain rulers.

I know a lot of people whod prove you wrong.

They have become deformed due to their own ambition, but none of them are cowards. No one with such deep flaws can cross the fifth gate.

Unconvinced, Dallion entered the massive structure, finding himself in a new realm. This one had the clear markings of an item, which by no means diminished the number of scrolls and books that were to be found. A network of interconnected rooms flowed in all directions. Only someone capable of flight would have the capability of exploring it adequately.

A new purple protector emerged this time a stern woman in a Victorian gown offering to assist Dallion in his search. She was quickly dismissed as he cast a flight spell and proceeded to learn on his own.

Hours passed, then days. Even before Dallion found the section of the living armor blueprints, he had taken a while stopping here and there. There were blueprints for harpsiswords, origami weapons, aether weapons, even purely awakened weapons; bows made solely of music intangible in the real world, but incredibly versatile in the realms. Thinking about it, the original skill weapons had been just that. Judging by the diary scroll accompanying the blueprint, a master forger had dedicated close to a century to achieve such a feat. His achievement had been acknowledged, celebrated, and locked away in the grand citadel, while the knowledge itself had been erased from the world.

Discoveries more beautiful and dangerous than those of the first Star filled this small auxiliary realm to the brim. How much was there in the rest of the citadel and all the realms it was linked to?

Veil, can you see this? Dallion asked. To his surprise, there was no response.

Somewhat concerned, he called out to Adzorg, Gleam, his familiars, even the domain guardians of his realms. Each time, the result was the same deafening silence.

Harp?

he asked.

Yes? The nymph instantly responded.

I cant talk to anyone in my realm.

Thats strange. I can.

Does Gen sense anything?

He says he can read your thoughts as usual, but is unable to talk to you.

It made sense that the archbishop would block the link between a visitor and his realm. That way he could be certain that the knowledge gathered for millennia would remain safe. Why had he allowed Dallion to talk to his harpsisword, though? Was it to show off? A friendly warning of his power? Or maybe it was something completely different.

Reaching forward, Dallion attempted to summon his harpsisword. His hand remained empty.

Having fun, archbishop? Dallion asked.

Just because I let you explore my citadel doesn't mean you'd remain unsupervised. The nymphs' voice morphed into that of the archbishop. No harm, no foul.

This was the second time that the Order of the Seven Moons impersonated someone within Dallion's realm. The previous time, it was Diroh's echo. Now it was Giaccia.

Now, after you've enjoyed a sample of my collection, have you come to a decision? An echo of the archbishop emerged in the air, floating a few steps away from Dallion.

What happens once he's removed? Dallion readied his fingers in case he had to quickly cast a spell. Specifically.

The world will witness his fall at the hands of the new champion of the people, Abla Tamin. You'll be mentioned as well, naturally. However, most of the spotlight will be on Abla.

And in the process, Abla will be replaced by a copyette.

It's not like I'll kill him. He'll live out the rest of his days in joy, calm, and luxury. With or without his original memories—whatever he chooses. It won't be the first time it's happened. The archbishop's tone darkened. A truce will be established between the empire and the Order, after which everything will continue pretty much as before.

Only with you in control.

You seem to think that I enjoy doing this. The faintest strand of sadness resonated in the echo's voice. How long have you been at it? Five years? A bit more? You probably still feel the thrill of it all—the sensation that your actions have saved the world, or made things better in some small aspect. After a few decades, things will start fading away.

Let me guess. Dallion's pinky finger moved, starting to cast a spell. Its position was such that the archbishop didn't have direct sight. I'll become the next Star?

I told you, the Star isn't the worst thing that could happen. Tamin killed three Stars.

For a split second, Dallion's pinky stopped moving. The emperor killed a Star? Several even?

Yes, he saved the world as well, helped his people, fell in love. And look at him now—disgusted with the world he once loved, seeing no other choice but to recreate it. Tallia still has the drive, but would you trust anyone who's spent an eternity in the banished realm? The sensation of sadness grew. It wasn't just sadness anymore, but also exhaustion. My exaltation happened eighty-seven years after the fall of Erakol. I only saw remnants of its glory. For decades I fought monsters of the wilderness, cultists, even the Star. It was then that I had my first distant prophecy and knew that if the world were to survive, it would need an overseer. Someone who could see everything and intervene when needed.

You just described what the emperor is doing. The summoning spell was almost complete. There was a good chance that the realm had some sort of protection preventing a standard summon. Using a few threads from the Moonstone would make it possible, though.

You're right. I made the same mistake the emperor made now. The world survived by a thread and no thanks to me. That's why I don't want to see history repeat. The archbishop's face lost all expression. Even if it means fighting you to prove it.

A spell circle formed near Dallions hand, letting him reach in and pull out his harpsisword. Simultaneously, an eight-foot staff of Moon platinum appeared in the archbishops hands.

COMBAT INITIATED

Both weapons ripped the air, flashing one against the other in a blow that made the air tremble. The library realm split in eight, each part moving away from the two awakened, ensuring that no knowledge would be lost in the duel.

The weapons clashed again. Clusters of music strands burst out from the vibration, each trying to surround and wrap the other.

Magic! Dallion thought, casting another summon spell with his free hand. Right now, that was his greatest advantage.

Smart move forcing me to fight here, the archbishop said, spinning his staff in front of him like a propeller blade. Id never risk harming the knowledge.

Its not me who forced you do this! Dallion pushed forward with a multi attack, each strike blocked by the staff.

Yes, you did. I watched you react thousands of different ways in my prophecies. In all the times we didnt fight, your resolve wavered, leaving the emperor to win. This is the only way to earn your respect and prove my determination.

Chapter 915: Deals of the Past

Another raven splatted, instantly evaporating into the air. Dallion had killed a dozen so far, yet still couldnt find the source. As far as he was aware, the birds appeared out of nothing, always emerging in the one spot he wasnt looking at. Combat splitting didnt help, either they would still fly in from behind each separate instance.

Itll be a long day if you keep doing that, the crow said.

Against his better judgment, Dallion didnt immediately kill it this time.

I always knew you could be curious. The creature cawed.

I destroyed you, Dallion said, still gripping two weapons.

I cannot be destroyed. You destroyed a convergence of me, though not before I shared some of my thoughts with other aspects of myself. I lost a lot of memories, though not all. The flapping intensified. Definitely not all.

The explanation sounded plausible. The void connected to many of the items and people it had corrupted through threads. What Dallion found difficult to believe was its presence on the island. If nothing else, the archbishop had purged everything to the last speck of dust of anything Star spawn and void creatures. There wasnt a single crack or hole that wasnt there by design. And yet, it was undeniable that this was a voidling taking the form of a grotesquely incomplete crow.

Did he show you the prophecy trick? the void asked, feathers melting off its body only for new ones to regrow. I spent decades trying to figure out how he does it.

Why are you here?

Why are you here? Joining forces with a monster?

Dallion thrust his harpsisword at the crow. The layer of water that had covered the blade shot forward, piercing the creation. Losing its integrity, the bird burst again.

You're testy today. A new crow flew down from the sky.

What do you know about monsters?

The same that any monster does how to recognize them. The crow cawed, amused. You're also on your way to becoming a monster, though you're not there yet. Maybe if you had a bit of me in you, you'd have some predatory instinct. It usually takes otherworlders centuries to build it up. I'm merely a shortcut.

How noble of you.

It's not me who came up with it. You can thank the Stars. I just improved the procedure, as they say.

Dallion tightened his grip around the hilts. He would be justified splashing the new embodiment of the void once more, yet the only thing that would achieve was to give into the being's provocation.

How are you here? Dallion asked, outwardly calm.

Finally, the correct question. The crow collapsed its wings into itself, distorting like a ferrofluid. Have you ever wondered why no one has ever found this island? Sure, everyone knows it's an island and they even know it's a sea, but no one can reach it unless Simon allows.

A benefit of the archbishop's abilities. Dallion couldn't make himself address the otherworlder by his first name.

Wrong. It's because of my abilities. A thin layer of void coating the domain bubble.

Any awakened would have sensed you.

Still missing the point. The crow attempted to sigh. The resulting sounds sounded like a caw mixed with a cat's hiss. He's not using void matter to make the island invisible. He's using it to constantly move it throughout the void. Just like what dear Arthurows tried to do with Nerosal at the time.

The incident was one of the most horrifying things Dallion had experienced back then. It was the first time he had glimpsed the wilderness as a sea of nothing, holding spheres of domains. Only later had he become aware that the wilderness was merely a tame copy of the void.

One had to admire the archbishop's ingenuity. When he had said that the citadel contained all knowledge, that also included that of the forbidden variety. It was normal to expect that Earth tech principles would make their way there, but void matter manipulation? That was a bit too much.

An island in constant motion, surrounded by an invisible layer of void. No wonder only he could invite guests.

All this is a bubble of illusion that is just a perfect cage in constant motion. The crow attempted to approach Dallion, but a slight movement of the harpsisword quickly made it stop. You've noticed that you can't talk to anyone outside this realm? You can't leave it, either.

If that's true, how did you pass through?

Where theres void, sooner or later cracks emerge. Simon knows it, but as long as I dont do anything, he chooses to ignore it. Hes probably busy with his trance of seeing the fate of the world. The bird cawed. He asked you to kill the emperor, didnt he?

For no clear reason, Dallion tensed up.

He did. Human laughter mixed with the crows cawing. How amusing. And youd be the perfect idiot to fall for it.

And youre here to help me, right?

Nothing has changed concerning me. I want to have some fun in this world before I inevitably consume it. The place will be a lot more interesting with you alive.

Why are you convinced I cant defeat the emperor?

You think the emperor will kill you? The crow flapped its wings, shedding feathers of black goo in the process. Youre as much a danger to Simon as the emperor is. Ive lost most of my memories of the time, but they used to be friends at one point. Then they were allies, and now enemies. Do you think that youd be different?

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I can show you. A third wing emerged from the back of the crow, extending towards Dallion. Dont worry, I wont try to corrupt you. I cant even if I wanted to.

You think Ill fall for that?

Im sure that you will. I dont see you as someone wholl accept just getting killed off. The void kept flapping in place, like a large, deformed black hummingbird. Youve peeked into memories before. This will be similar. The only difference will be that youll see the memory I wish.

Even assuming that the void wouldnt attempt to invade Dallions realm, letting it choosing what to show was dangerous. It could select exactly what it wanted to show, stripping it of any context. Dallion could see through the entitys transparent attempt to turn him into a Star. The crow didnt seem to be composed of more than a bucket of void matter, but there was a lot more where that came from. On the other hand, there was a way Dallion could take advantage of the situation. One thing rang true in the crows wordshe didnt fully trust the archbishop, either.

Whatever Simon has in stall, hell kill both you and the emperor, the crow cawed louder. It wouldnt be the first time. I, too, formed an alliance with him for the exact same purpose. Our arrangement was broken when I went after Adzorgs wonderful device.

The archbishop and the void working together? That was a lot more than using void matter; to actually ask a living embodiment of corruption and decay to kill off someone was inconceivable. Still, it would explain why the general was tolerated for so long. Dallion had never given the matter any thought in the past, but there was no way that the archbishop, if not the entire Order itself, was aware of the generals true nature. The slaps on the wrist, the cultists infiltration within the Order, it could all have been the unfortunate cost of doing business, all for the greater good.

Spark, Dallion said out loud. His entire body was covered by a bright white glow.

The void crow pulled back, attempting to move quickly away from Dallion. Before it could, he flew forward at a speed far greater than the entity could have foreseen, grabbing its wing.

MEMORY FRAGMENT

A pitch-black rectangle appeared. A split second later, the memory flowed through. The void was right that it was a very different experience than any he had. For starters, Dallion didn't experience the memory from the eyes of the owner not that the void had eyes but as a presence witnessing a scene.

There was no indication of time, but Dallion assumed that it was a few centuries before the present day. He could recognize the copyette ruins. That would become the foundation of Nerosal. There were few permanent buildings, all of them built with the sole purpose of housing troops and artifacts found on the site. The general was also there. His attire was very different, but there was no mistaking the arrogantly snobbish face.

Does this stir up any memories? he asked a fury a few steps away.

The fury had the appearance of a high-level mercenary, but both the general and Dallion's presence could feel it being a copyette.

The past is the past. The other said in a deep voice. The archbishop has sent me with an offer. You'll be allowed to experience and amass a lot more memories as long as you do one simple task.

He sounds rather confident. The general narrowed his eyes. Overconfident, some might say.

Everything you've achieved could be taken away, the fury went on. You won't be killed, but you'll lose your source of enjoyment.

The comment made an emotion flicker within the void entity: anger, jealousy, even fear. Like a child threatened with having his favorite toy snatched away, the general stepped to the side, thousands of void tendrils filling the space between his skin and his clothes.

If you attack me, you'll seriously wound me, but you'll reveal your nature, the copyette said calmly. That won't be much of an issue, because you'll kill everyone at the dig, but attract the attention of an archduke, who'll kill and purge you using spark attacks. You're welcome to try, but the archbishop didn't foresee you doing so.

Oh? What did he foresee? the general remained at the ready.

You'll try to negotiate and demand terms, but ultimately, you'll accept the offer. You'll impose one condition, which is acceptable. In return, you'll be given an additional demand.

Two can play at that game. There was a note of maliciousness in the general's voice. I know where the grand citadel is located at all times. What makes Simon so certain that I won't just share that with the rest of the world?

The fury merely turned towards him, illustrating that he made his point.

He can't purge all of my memories. Even if he were to arrive here himself and kill me with a spark attack, some of my memories will survive and he can't destroy all the void in the world.

A tense moment of silence formed, broken only by the work in the excavation site below. The workers low level awakened were too far to hear the conversation and, in any event, had far more pressing worries, such as not being punished for slow progress. The site was supposed to have been fully excavated months ago, yet the more they dug up, the larger it became, as if there were a whole city buried underground.

What does he want? the general asked.

You're to kill the emperor.

At those words, even the embodiment of the void looked around.

That's quite the task. Given the results of the last encounter with the Star, what does Simon think I will achieve?

You're resourceful, unlike the current stars. Achieve this and hell make sure that a healthy portion of your experiences are never lost.

Tempting, but Ill need to add one clarification. This isn't to be a short-term goal. Ill need time to put him in a position in which I could achieve the deed.

Accepted.

The general blinked several times, then his smile widened to almost inhuman proportions.

He actually prophesied this? I almost feel special.

In return, you're to send him a Moonstone every year.

A Moonstone? He really has a lot of demands, doesn't he?

The archbishop trusts you're resourceful and in the spirit of cooperation has already provided some starting resources. You're the proud owner of a substantial piece of land in this area, approved by the archduke himself. When this becomes a city, that will amount to a lot.

So, this will become a city. The general looked around.

A city will provide a lot of interesting memories and new experiences. Just don't try to betray him.

Of course. Who am I to fight someone who sees the future? The general laughed. Besides, we want the same thing. He looked back at the massive excavation site. A world to provide amusement.

The memory abruptly ended as the form of the void crow evaporated, consumed by Dallion's spark. The void entity had certainly retained all its previous memories, but there was a good chance that this latest conversation had been purged away.

Dallion looked back down. From this distance, the island was the size of a pebble. In less than a day, the archbishop's plans to eliminate Emperor Tamin would be complete. If Dallion were to stay, he'd be part of them likely the distraction to occupy the ruler while both of them were killed. With all the training invested in him, Dallion was certain that the plan had always been to fight him and the emperor, but he also remembered something Cleric had mentioned years ago. Two powers in the world had the knowledge of rockets: the Imperial House and the Order of the Seven Moons.

The archbishop didn't need to take over the imperial capital, all he needed was to glass it out of existence with the emperor in it.

Chapter 916: Cage of Moonlight

The thought of the Glass Mounts came to mind as Dallion imagined what would happen if the archbishop unleashed what Emperor Tamin had on the Azure federation. As far as he knew, the Order of the Seven Moons had never done anything of the sort. Even in all the historical scrolls, it was said that the war clerics only targeted wilderness beasts or Star cultists. Everyone admitted that they were strong with such an amount of awakened, there was no way they wouldn't be but no one could perceive them as an aggressor. How could it be otherwise if they hired hunters and mercenaries to do their bidding? That was, if they didn't exert their political power to have some local noble do it.

Once the imperial ceremony started, the capital might well end up in the same state as the fallen south. The only way to prevent it was to warn Tamin, but to do that Dallion had to escape the domain of the island.

Unwilling to risk talking to anyone in his realm, in case the archbishop used one of his tricks, Dallion split into two hundred instances and flew straight up.

The IVORY TOWER realm prevents you from leaving its bounds!

A multitude of green rectangles emerged. It seemed that the void hadn't exaggerated when it came to the archbishop's power. The entity's mere presence, however, had told Dallion that somewhere a crack had to exist. All that remained was for him to find it.

Sorry, Harp. Dallion unsummoned his aura sword, then took hold of the harpsisword with both hands. I'll need your help on this.

Two hundred spark-infused spiral attacks were cast towards the sky. Most of them abruptly stopped as they struck the invisible barrier mid-air. In one case, part of the force managed to leak through.

Turning that instance into reality, Dallion immediately focused on the spot. On close inspection, the barrier seemed slightly thinner, as if someone had eaten several layers of the surface. The spot was no larger than a human hand—not enough for anyone to squeeze through, but there were ways of making an exception.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion performed a series of spiral attacks on the spot. With each, the main in his arm increased. Magic strands snapped along the outlines of the realm dome. Whatever the archbishop had done was giving way to the attacks.

One more, Dallion kept telling himself after every attack.

Stubbornly, the dome refused to fully break.

One more, Dallion whispered. One more! One more! One more!

He could no longer feel his arms, but kept on going.

Finally, the dome gave in. Part of the layer of protection shattered.

CAGE BREAKER

(+2 Body)

You're the first person who's broken through a Moon ray dome. Then again, very few have tried.

A blue rectangle flashed briefly. Dallion ignored it, flying straight through the opening. The last thing he wanted was to have a repeat of his fight with the archbishop.

Dal? He heard Veils voice within his realm. What was going on? It was as if you vanished.

Dallion kept on going. He wanted to put as much distance between him and the archbishop as possible. Only afterwards would he focus on the larger picture. From this point on, he couldnt trust any echoes or realm voices, even his own.

Dont trust anyone,

Dallion thought. If that had been the real Veil, Dallions echoes would have conveyed the message along with all his other plans and fears. Right now, it was important that Dallion got back to Alliance as quickly as possible. Normally, that would be easy. Domain rulers had an obvious advantage when it came to travel, yet that required a domain and right now Dallion was in the middle of the ocean. Approaching the water, let alone trying to reach the bottom, would attract the attention of the nymphs and he wasnt looking forward to facing Tiallia so soon.

Summoning his aura sword, Dallion cast several hundred magic messages and sent them to various spots in the world. While there was no known spell to determine his location, magic had a way around it.

The letters split up, each taking the shortest route to their destination. Immediately, two things became clear: Dallion was a lot closer to the east side of the continent and more to the south than he expected.

Lux, he said as he summoned his bladebow.

Boss! The firebird chirped. I knew youd be alright!

Never mind that. Dallion cast a new torrent of letters. Fly in that direction. As fast as you can.

Boss? can you handle

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Do it, Lux. Dallion had no patience, not right now.

With a chirp, the bladebow turned, coming into contact with Dallions back. He could feel the width of the weapon all the way from his waist to his neck. The sharp crescent bow touched both of his shoulders a scary notion, which was why he strengthened his magic threads in the area, creating a magical cushion. Moments later, he experienced what it was like to suddenly be thrust into mach five speeds. Maybe the more alarming thing was that his current body was able to handle it without issue.

We need to talk, dear boy. The voice of a very alarmed Adzorg came from Dallions realm.

Just as before, there was no guarantee that the voice actually came from the old mage. However, with the collapse of the empire at risk, Dallion had to take the chance. As long as he didnt share anything that the archbishop didnt already know, there was nothing hed lose.

How much do you know? Dallion asked.

Only what your echoes told me not to trust anyone from the Order.

Given you're from the Academy, I thought that would come naturally.

Stop playing games, Adzorg snapped. You're really not that good at it. You go to form an alliance with the Order, against the advice of virtually everyone. You get on a boat then completely vanish to the point that even your echoes have no idea what's going on; then you re-emerge and warn everyone now to trust the Order. It doesn't take a Moon to see that something must have happened in-between.

If only the old man knew. So much had happened in that seemingly short amount of time that Dallion didn't even know where to start. For the moment, it was best not to share that the archbishop was millennia old and had fired the void to assassinate the emperor.

The archbishop wants to kill the emperor. Dallion took the direct approach. I was supposed to be the bait, but now I know that he wants to take both of us out.

How? Adzorg asked.

In his mind, Dallion went through the possibilities. Either this was the archbishop probing to tell how much Dallion had made out, or it really was Adzorg who shared a natural concern with events. If Dallion said the wrong thing, the plan might be changed or hastened.

Make a Moon vow, Dallion said. Vow that you are Adzorg, the old archmage that I knew.

Isn't that going a bit overboard? You know who I am. Ask any question if you wish.

The answer was untypically evasive. Maybe this was a trap after all?

Make the vow, Dallion repeated.

In the distance, the faint line of land was starting to peek above the horizon. It was tempting to split into instances and look back to check if there was any sign of the island, but that would be a costly mistake. The archbishop's high mind trait would make him better at forced splitting, causing Dallion to experience the least preferable option.

I am Adzorg, the mage. The old man said with a sigh. The same that pretended to be your echo advisor during your time in the Icepicker guild.

The specifics were enough for the vow to take hold if this were a lie.

He's planning on using rockets, Dallion said.

Emperor Tamin? Adzorg asked, surprised.

The archbishop. He has the knowledge of rockets as well.

Dear boy, thats very difficult to believe. If that were the case, someone would have remembered. I know its said that the Order of the Seven Moons holds all knowledge, but

They are also the only ones who curse, banish, and delevel people, Dallion interrupted. If they wanted an event forgotten, why are you so certain they would have failed?

They could, but people would have noticed the inconsistencies. I would have noticed them. Like the hidden Moons. Until you acquire their trait, everything written about them is blank, but its still there. Its not like new lines appear in tones and scrolls. Rather, the spaces that previously seemed empty are now filled out. If the Order used rockets, where did they, exactly?

Dallion didnt reply.

And please dont tell me that they created the ocean. We have an entire species returned from banishment that would disagree.

I know how to make rockets! Dallion mentally shouted. I know how to make living armor. If I want, I could even make a machine gun!

Dallion wasnt sure whether the last had any meaning to Adzorg, but the mere sound of it helped push his message through.

Why should they have this knowledge if they hadnt used them in the past?

Now it was the mages turn to remain silent.

The archbishop said there was a ceremony taking place to honor the survivors of the dragon hunt, Dallion continued. The emperor must stop it.

Dear boy

I dont care about the optics! The city is infiltrated with copyettes as it is. Having the emperor in public would present the best opportunity for attack. My guess would be the copyettes would create enough confusion so no one sees the

I cant warn him! Adzorg almost shouted.

This was untypical in more ways than one, but also unhelpful.

Why not? Dallion asked.

Because of the vow you made me make before. I cant tell the emperor anything relating to you and vice versa.

Are you serious?!

Very.

Were talking about saving his life. Tell him just that. Dont even mention me.

Thats not how vows work. If there were loopholes, people would have established a system by now making the entire concept of Moon vows worthless. If you want to warn him, youll have to come here yourself.

That was easier said than done. Dallion himself had declared war to the empire not too long ago. Having him charge into the capital, claiming he'd changed his mind, wasn't an option. As the cloud forts moving towards the imperial palace were an indication, the place was tightly guarded. That's what created the glaring weakness in the heart of the empire: everyone was so focused on outside threats that they'd be defenseless against an enemy within, especially if that enemy could change appearance.

Can you act on it? Dallion asked.

Even if we consider me doing so bordering my vow, there's nothing I could do. The mage sighed. Technically, I'm still a prisoner. I've been granted huge freedoms, yes, but leaving the confines of my enormous room isn't one of them. And if what you've said is true, creating a ruckus might have the opposite effect on what's desired.

The coast was fully visible now. It would still be about five more minutes for Dallion to reach it, possibly ten, but it was close enough to tell Lux to start decelerating. Maybe after another minute, though.

I'm truly sorry, dear boy. The web of events prevents me from getting involved. You'll have to deal with this on your own.

That was the worst possible outcome. After breaking out of the archbishops' hold, Dallion had hoped there'd be a way to prevent the attack from happening. As things stood, all three powers in the world hated him one way or another. All they had to do was briefly combine forces to wipe him off the face of the world, along with everything he had achieved. Even worse, if the archbishop succeeded with his plan and took out the Tamin Empire, that would leave Dallion hopelessly outnumbered. The only solution was to form a new alliance, this time with the emperor.

Chapter 917: Search for New Allies

Before Dallion set foot in Alliance, Veil was there waiting to greet him. Any other day, the overseer would have already muttered a few I told you sos. Not this time. The situation was bad enough without resorting to pettiness.

Have everyone be on guard, Dallion ordered. And tell Hannah to expect copyettes. She'll know what to do.

In truth, it was Pans advice that Dallion wanted, though he preferred not to say it openly.

How's Eury?

In the forge, as Gen instructed. Veil slid along the ground in an attempt to keep up. I've isolated the place, so only you two will be there.

Dallion nodded. In his mind, he had already come up with the series of spells to add additional layers of protection, spies, and other threats.

Are you sure none of the other forgers can help? There's no one close to your level, but even at your speed, there isn't much that two people could achieve.

No. Dallion's tone was frightenedly sharp. Only the two of us.

Sure, Dal. Whatever you say.

Dont let any clerics get near. And get the dwarves to block off the gates.

You think weve been infiltrated? Veil whispered.

Dallion didnt give a response, but with everything that the archbishop had done, it was nave to think they hadnt. That was, probably, the greatest threat the Order held above everyone: as long as they were supportive, things seemed okay. The moment they turned, one could never be sure how bad things really were. Everyone within all of Dallions domains had risked their lives in fighting nymphs and beasts, yet that was no guarantee they werent copyettes.

Threads of calm, determination, and bravery were in the air. The overseer was doing everything necessary to keep the spirits up and the inhabitants ready for battle. Years ago, Dallion would have felt sick at the thought hed be resorting to such means. Sadly, the stakes were too high not to.

People, buildings, and items greeted him as he passed by. Responding as curtly as he could afford, Dallion made his way straight to the city forge. The whole space had been rendered no existent for all but a handful of people. The normal citizen would pass by and never suspect that there had been a building there. Only mages and domain rulers would see the discrepancy and of them, only someone with a high enough level as Dallion would be able to enter the spot.

The sound of bellows and hammers could already be heard from inside. Euryale had gotten to work. That was good.

Moving faster than a gust of wind, Dallion went next to her. The gorgon, in turn, responded, turning around to give him a loving embrace.

Missed you, she whispered.

Tell me about it. Dallion held her tight, though only for a moment. So glad to see you alright.

I left the monastery the moment Veil told me you were going to see the archbishop. The snakes on her head swirled. I didnt want him to use me to threaten you.

Lucky that she had. Things would have been considerably worse if she had remained in the Orders grip.

Are you sure you want to go through with this? she asked. We wont be able to undo this.

Its already too late to be undone.

It was a dangerous game they were playing. Two sides already had rockets. The nymph empress had similarly dangerous mass spells. The only way he could compete was with a makeshift response, even if it was way underpowered compared to everyone else.

It would have been nice if Dallion had the time to create something more impressive, possibly experiment a bit to add his own out of the box thinking. In order to make it to the capital on time, his only chance was to make crossbow rocketsas many of them as possible.

Summoning his clay cylinders, Dallion created three aether echoes. Contrary to initial expectations, creating rockets was childs play when it came to magic. As long as one knew the principles and

proportionssomething that people in this world had difficulty graspingeverything else was a matter of creating as much alloy as quickly as possible.

Eury and two of Dallions echoes focused on the metalwork, while he himself cast the spells on the red-hot bolts. In order to make things as fast as possible, the gorgon had constructed a mound beforehand, based purely on Veils instructions. Just like her, the end result was nearly flawless.

Once the first batch cooled down enough, Dallion carefully took one. In his mind, he knew that it would take significant pressure for the bolt to explode. His subconscious, though, feared that if someone were to go wrong, it would take the entire building with it.

Dal? Eury asked, seeing the way he was looking at it. Are you alright?

Just thinking about something. He kept his eyes on the object. During the creation process, he had made sure for it to be a sphere item. Sending an item guardian to its death, even if he knew that guardians could always be brought back, was a bit too much. Never thought wed have to use one of these, he sighed.

Theres still a chance that we wont.

Dallion looked her way. The chances of that were less than zero.

Well need a crossbow, he said after a brief pause. I cant see myself throwing these by hand.

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Dal

. Veils voice came from the realm. *We have a problem.*

Still conscious of a potential trap set up by the archbishop, Dallion didn't respond. If that were really the overseer, hed have no trouble appearing in person. The fact that he didnt already put Dallion on guard.

Eury just came back, Veil continued. Pan cleared her. Ive no idea whos there with you, but it isnt your wife!

So fast that they didnt create a blur, Dallions fingers cast a protective spell. Layers of hard amber spread from him along the floor, quickly going up every surface. Before anyone could react, the inside of the room was encased in the substance. It would hardly be enough to stop a copyette mage for long, but it was able to slow one down provided that the person here really was a copyette. There still wasnt any guarantee that the voice that Dallion heard really came from Veil. With both potential threats being in the city, he didnt have the luxury of ignoring either.

Dallion summoned his bladebow, then burst into instances. In all, he thrust the weapon at her, careful to only hit her with the kaleidervisto. In ninety-nine percent of the cases, the attempt ended in failure. Yet, in two instances, he succeeded. Upon coming into contact with the artifact, a patch of translucent skin appeared on the gorgons shoulder, quickly spreading further. The fake Euryale pulled away, but it was too latethe disguise had been revealed.

Aware that the gig was up, the form quickly morphed into that of a slime. Three tentacles emerged from it, quickly transforming into weapons.

Knowing that any delay would cost him, Dallion infused his bladebow with spark and went forward with an arc attack. One of the creature's limbs was severed off, falling on the floor. As it splattered, the liquid was quickly drawn to the rest of the creature, quickly becoming one whole.

I wouldn't have harmed you, the copyette said in a female voice. There's no point. The archbishop has already foreseen every eventuality.

In that case, why's your voice full of music strands? Dallion asked, himself using music skills to counter the attack. How did you get here?

Why should I tell you anything? The copyette split into four. Dallion's echoes hadn't been idle, either. Aether spheres appeared in the room, capturing several of them like in a prison. That seemed to have been planned, though. For all captured parts of the slime exploded, shattering their aether cages and scattering fragments all about like shrapnel.

Despite his best intentions, Dallion was unable to evade all of them, earning himself a few nasty wounds. His aether echoes fared no different, poofing out of existence as a result.

You're right. Dallion summoned his harpsisword. You don't have to. Still, I'll give you a chance to surrender.

Eager to know who else is here? The copyette laughed. There's more of us than you know. The truth is that only one race was permanently banished from this world. The archbishop started bringing us back millennia ago. We've buried within it so deep that whole family trees are created by us.

Dallion continued forward, engaging the creature with a multi attack. The copyette tried desperately to fend off the strikes with dozens of tentacles emerging from it, but the difference between the two was too vast. Now that it had lost the element of surprise, there was no way for it to win. And as Dallion's coating spell had proved, even if it were to explode, that wouldn't affect the rocket bolts.

Last chance. Dallion's confidence quickly returned. He'd already seen that the archbishop couldn't affect combat splitting from such a distance. Furthermore, the once undefeatable copyettes were now no different than brainless thugs. Surrender, and you'll be spared.

Sorry, Dal. The slime kept on retreating, though not for one second stopping the fight. I don't want you to bring the end of the world.

You believe in the prophecies you make?

They're called prophecies because they're true. At one point, you probably meant well, but the archbishop has seen what will happen if you survive. The second most dangerous person in the world after the emperor is you.

Before Dallion could react, the flexible material composing the copyette's body became solid. The moment the next attack landed, it cracked it up like a pack of cracklings. Fearing that the copyette might explode, Dallion leaped back. Hardened slime turned to blue sand, spilling all over the floor.

Four seconds later, Veil emerged onto the scene accompanied by Panin in the guise of the merchant Fatunand Euryale wearing her sun gold armor.

Are you alright? she instantly said, but Dallion gave her a sign not to approach.

It refused to surrender, he said, bending down. The sand was everywhere, like ground glass. Lux, fly to Eury, he said, looking over his shoulder.

The request was more than clear there was no way of knowing that only one fake Euryale had infiltrated the city. His wife knew that, which was why she took hold of the kaleidervisto on top of the weapon without hesitation. Once done, she handed it to Veil.

Is this safe? Dallion asked.

Yep, Pan replied. Very safe. Also disgusting.

How did it get here?

I've no idea. She felt like Eury entering your domain. Said the right things, even went through the conversations we had via the realms.

I guess it's safe to say that the Order can listen in on realm conversations. So much for keeping things secret.

If all the other advantages weren't enough, this took things on a whole different level. The reason the Order knew so much wasn't merely due to its vast presence, or its network of spies. The archbishop had been listening in to conversations between awakened and echoesconversations that were supposed to be as secure as the world allowed. Dallion might as well have sent letters of his conversation with Adzorg to the entire Order.

How many more do you think there are? The overseer turned to Pan.

A dozen at most, the copyette replied. Any more and I would have felt something.

You didn't sense that one.

We'll just have to be more thorough when we go through the cities.

There'll be no checking, Dallion said. We're putting all this on a wagon and heading to the capital.

Utter silence filled the room. Emotions beamed from everyone like beacons. Concern, alarm, readiness for war.

You're going there on a wagon? Eury asked the obvious question. Running will be faster.

I can't get there flying, and I'm not sure what I can trust. A wagon with three people will be enough. I'll summon the horses. They'll be almost as fast as me. We'll be there until noon tomorrow at most. After that He stood up and shrugged. At least the Moons will witness a spectacle.

There was nothing to add to that. The domain wasn't under siege, but this might well be their last stand. If Dallion failed to save the emperor and form an alliance with him, he wouldn't be able to bear the full brunt of the Order against him.

Why three? Veil broke the uneasy silence in typical fashion.

In order to succeed, we need to do three things: deal with the hidden copyettes, save the imperial capital from the Order's rockets, and survive long enough for the emperor to change his mind about us. Eury will use a crossbow to keep the skies safe, I'll fight any threat on the ground, and Pan will help reveal the copyette infiltrators. All it takes is to reveal a few for the fight to shift. Meanwhile, you, Hannah, and Di will protect what's here. The Order has too much at stake to tip their hand

while the emperors alive, but that doesnt guarantee they wont try. When Im done, I want to have something to come back to.

Chapter 918: Dallion's Prophecy

The wagon sped through the wilderness, leaving trails of dust behind it. It was pulled by a pair of cutlings, of all creatures. Dallion had coated the harnesses with aether, making sure that the creatures wouldnt destroy any part of the wagon. At the same time, they could freely run through trees, rocks, and any other obstacles on the road. And of course, there was the threat of Nox should they try to get out of control.

Nice gear, Pan said. The copyette had the spitting image of the merchant that had initially taken Dallion to Nerosal. Only this time, the wagon was full of weapons and ammunition.

Thanks. Eury made it for me.

The copyette whistled.

I know, Im a lucky guy. Dallion laughed. I just hope I reach the capital on time.

Im doing the best I can, Pan grumbled. Its bad enough we took this shortcut. The death rate along here is thirty percent.

Itll be fine. Dallion tapped the hilt of his harpsisword.

Im counting on that. Whats the good in earning a huge profit if Im not there to enjoy it?

I hear you.

So far, they had been extremely lucky. There hadnt been a single cloud fort the entire trip. If things continued like this, they would be at their destination in half a day, safe and sound.

Keep on driving, Dallion turned around. Ill check the cargo.

Right. Ill yell if something pops up.

Carefully, Dallion moved to the back of the wagon. Wooden crates were everywhere, each with a mark of a waxing blue Moon. Dallion opened one. Rows of orange crossbow bolts lined the crates. They looked normal to the naked eye, yet Dallion knew that they werent just boltsthey were rockets.

What the heck? He froze.

All this seemed too weird, as if he was experiencing dj vu. No, not dj vu; it closely resembled a few dreams hed had years ago. The wagon, the weapons, the conversation with Fatunalthough in this case it was Pan with Fatuns appearance Everything had been part of his dream, only slightly different. For one thing, Eury wasnt with them in his dream.

Everything okay back there? Pan asked.

Looks like. Dallion placed his hand on the top of a crate. All fine on your end?

Not sure. Clouds are gathering. Its too far to tell if theyre aiming for us.

Keep on going. If we run, theyll just chase us. Maybe theyll take us for ordinary merchants.

Ordinary merchants, the driver repeated. I used to be that once, before you got me involved in this. Too late to back out now. He laughed.

Dallion glanced towards the front. Only a crack of the sky was visible, but enough for him to see the threat Pan had mentioned. Dozens of clouds were forming, all converging on a single point. An army of furies was gathering.

I should never have built the rockets, Dallion whispered.

It was too late to do anything about it now. There was one glimmer of hope, though the clouds were white. All crimson furies belonged outright to the emperor and had a few special skills.

Do you want me to call Dark? Euryale asked, moving closer.

No.

If it came to a confrontation, there would be no winners. Even if the trio destroyed the armies with their skills and part of the weapons they were carrying, in the long term they would only kill off their own forces. The goal of this suicide mission was to gain enough allies to stand against the Order and the nymphs.

Gleam, Dallion summoned the spectral shardfly from his realm. Can you mask us well enough?

If they're only furies, sure. The creature fluttered around his head, her size reduced to that of a normal butterfly. If there's something else, there might be problems.

Gem, help her. Dallion summoned the aetherfish. And be quick. He hesitated. You can use a fragment of the dragon heart. Not a lot, though!

Yes, boss the glowing jellyfish said, then followed Gleam out in the open.

Dallion had gone through a lot of pivotal moments before, and just like them, the success of this attempt would change the course of history. It all depended on whether the imperial furies had been sent for him, or were merely creating a large perimeter around the capital. There was every chance that a few of the Order's copyettes had helpfully shared a thing or two regarding Dallion's plans.

That's what he wants me to do, Dallion whispered.

He planned on letting you go?

The concept was in the realm of possibility. The void had worked for the archbishop before. Who was to say that it still wasn't? Having two threats at the same place at the same time would be a tempting prospect, as would be having them fight one another. Most likely, the archbishop was hedging his bets.

I must help out, Dallion thought placing his hand on the wagon floor.

The moment he felt Gleam start her illusion spell, he joined in with one of his own, only using a substantial part of the Moonstone. At his current level, he was skilled enough not to waste the entire thing, but even so, he was fully aware of the possibilities lost with every second. There would still be enough for him to create another gem, as well as the promise he made, but it would be cutting it quite close.

The cutlings slowed down. They had taken on the form of average horses, so now they had to have the behavior to match. If the cloud forts had noticed the sudden change, they hadn't reacted to it yet, moving in the wagons direction like a storm.

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The minutes dragged on. All three otherworlders were ready to enter combat at any point. Should they see the slightest hint that their deception had failed, they'd have no choice but to strike first and as hard as possible.

Nearly twenty minutes later, the first cloud structure was almost above them. Thanks to the Moonstones boost, solid matter was no obstacle to Dallion, letting him see the magic threads within the cloud with ease. The fort had thousands of furies, ordered in the same fashion he himself had established during the vortex fields battle. He was certain that dozens of the occupants were communicating with their counterparts via echo itemsconversations that had every chance of being listened on or faked. A few battle mages were also there, their bright purple glow distinguishing them from all other living entities. If anyone would see through the illusion, it would be them.

Calmly, Eury opened one of the crates and took a few bolts out. If it came to the worst, she wouldn't hesitate shooting through the flimsy wooden roof at the forts. The power would be more than enough to erase it from existence in the second greatest fireworks display the world had seen in centuries.

Would you look at that, Pan said, engaging in his Fatun persona. Didn't think there'd be so many of them here. Do you think the Azures have gotten this far?

No, Dallion replied, using his music skills to modify his voice. Someone would have heard about it.

The fort kept on floating by. Based on their reaction, they didn't find the wagon suspicious, continuing with their original orderswhatever they were. However, that was just the first one. There were hundreds more.

It was said that anxiety and boredom were opposites. Once in a million, a situation would arise in which both emotions would team up together in a symbiotic relation. This was one of those times. Dallion couldn't wait for this to be over with, yet still feared being engaged at any moment. Despite his measured consumption of the Moonshard, a quarter of it had been shaved off. There was every chance that at least as much would be wasted again once they got in view of the imperial walls.

It'll be fine, the gorgon whispered.

The last of the forts had passed over, continuing their flight south. With luck, in a few minutes, there'd be no need for Dallion to maintain the illusion spell. In half that long, Dallion took a risk and ended his involvement. It wasn't so much his fear that he'd use up the Moonstone, but the dull pain throughout the body. Putting so much effort in maintaining a spell of that level remained exhausting even for the second highest awakened in the world.

They're gone, Eury said, taking a discreet peek from the back of the wagon.

In response, Dallion merely sat on the floor, his back against a stack of crates.

How long before we reach the capital?

At our current speed a few days, Pan replied. Im joking. We should be there in three or four hours. Head for the overseers sector, Dallion reminded.

Youve told us three times already.

Ironically, that was the weakest part of the citys defenses. Ordinary awakened, and even nobles, wouldnt dare venture through an entire neighborhood of city overseers. Beyond the one hundred level, though, it would be no different than fighting off a swarm of wasps painful and dangerous if one was not careful, but nothing that could stop anyone from going through. Most important of all, the area wasnt considered part of the city domain. The overseers had been granted a modicum of autonomy, allowed to spend their everyday life in private in exchange for the centuries of servitude they had vowed to their ruler. It was after the initial breach that things would get complicated. All bladerers and metalins would swarm the trio the instant they went through the citys domain barrier, followed by all battle mages and legionaries that could be spared.

Ill have a nap. Dallion closed his eyes. Let me know when were close.

Sure.

Initially, Dallion thought Eury had replied. Moments later, he became aware of the obvious vocal differences. Reaching out to summon his harpsisword, Dallion jumped to his feet, only to find himself in a modern dorm room.

Jumpy, a youth dressed in a loose green shirt and a pair of baggy jeans remarked. The being had taken on the appearance of a college student, but there could be no doubt that he was the Green Moon. Literally.

Im sleeping again? Dallion looked around. Without a doubt, he was out of the wagon and in a college dorm roomhis dorm room. It had been a while since hed had dreams of this sort. There was a time when hed pray to the Moons every night to have them. Now, the sensation filled him with fear.

You were pretty tired, the Moon replied. Out like a lite.

What did I do wrong? Dallion asked.

So negative, his roommate said, then smiled. Good. It means youre learning. But no, Im not here to give you some ominous warning, just to wish you good luck.

Dallion narrowed his eyes.

Why? he asked.

Because youve reached the endgame. You cant imagine how long it took for everything to get here. Millions gave up along the way, and here you are. Thats why youre one of my favorites.

And the archbishop? Was he one of your favorites as well?

Simon is an entirely different story I cant get into right now.

He has the empathy trait.

All four of you have all four traits. That's one of the requirements for getting here. It doesn't guarantee anything, but you can't manage without it.

So, this really is a game for your amusement. To his own surprise, Dallion didn't feel any anger or spite. Even the fear had vanished, as if he had come to the acceptance. The Jiroh in the awakening trial was right.

Make it to the end and you'll find out. The Moon laughed.

Felygn, wait! Tell me

Dallion tried to take a step forward. Upon doing so he found himself back in the wagon, sitting as he had before falling asleep.

Don't be nervous, Eury said. We're almost there.

I'm not, he lied. He could tell that there was some unspecified danger linked to the whole thing. I'm thinking of the leveling up.

Eager to become a world ruler? A cluster of Eury's snakes turned in his direction. Don't be. Things only get more complicated.

At least I won't be stuck dealing with the minor things.

If you're having difficulty with the trifles, how will you handle the really important things?

Dallion had no answer to that, not that it dissuaded him. If he became the sole power in the world, he'd no longer have to run around serving anyone. Becoming a new player was much better than remaining the leading piece.

Outside the back of the wagon, two Moons appeared on the horizon. One was the Green Moon Dallion was following. The other one had a pale yellowish color he hadn't seen before.

What's that Moon? Dallion asked.

Felygn, Eury replied without even turning around.

No, not that. The other one.

The comment got a quick reaction. The snakes on the entire back of the gorgon's head stretched out, looking at the horizon for several seconds.

There's just one Moon, the gorgon replied with a sigh. Dal, did you skip sleep again?

I slept, Dallion lied. And still, he could see two Moons, one of which wasn't supposed to exist.

If the Star was a Moon, maybe the sun could be as well? he asked out loud.

In all the scrolls, it was written that there were Seven Moons and twelve suns, which represented constellations of skills. Yet, if that was the case, what did the real sun correspond to? It wasn't mentioned anywhere. Could it be the lost Eight Moon? Or maybe it was the new Star, the scorching, merciless ball of power that burned everyone that tried to get close to it?

Just hang on a little longer, the gorgon said. Once this is over, we'll be able to get some rest.

I've seen this before, Dallion thought. Only slightly different.

The archbishop hadn't been lying when he'd said that prophecies weren't unique to him. The difference was that Dallion had only realized that once, his vision of the future had come to pass. Now, just as before, he had no clue what the outcome would be.

Chapter 919: Invasion of the capital

Dont move! Dallion said, combining magic with music skills to freeze everyone in their tracks.

Everyone within earshot obeyed the command, freezing in an almost petrified state. The will Dallion exerted on them was stronger than any normal person could endure. Even the few overseers present were unable to react. They were weak compared to the more experienced ones that served the palace and high-nobles, but even so, the achievement was a massive feat.

Eury was a lot less subtle, directly petrifying anyone in a direct line of sight.

Behind them all, Pan seemed to casually stroll along, levitating the crates of rocket bolts behind him.

No one here, he said in a calm tone.

Hiding among overseers? Euryale asked, carrying a heavy crossbow on each shoulder. They're not idiots.

Some of them impersonated overseers, Dallion noted.

The snakes on the gorgons head stirred. Good to know.

That's the way in. Dallion pointed in the direction of an insignificant road. It didn't seem remotely heading in the direction of the palace. Everyone that could see the domain spheres could notice the multitude of layers that intersected there. When we cross it, all hell will break loose.

It wasn't just the metalins and people, either. Every item and domain guardian would also attempt to get in their way. After all, the emperor was an empath as well and had centuries to establish trust and fear within everything in his domain.

Are you sure we don't need Dark? Euryale reminded once more.

No. Hell only get hurt. Or worse. If things start falling from the sky, then maybe hell be of some help.

You've become quite confident. She smiled. It suits you.

In his mind, Dallion returned the smile. There'd been times when he'd longed for such a compliment. Now, it was the warmth coming from the gorgon, more than anything, that made him happy. As the saying went, no matter what happened, at least they'd be together.

Lets go. Summoning all three of his swords, he dashed forward.

The other two followed, keeping a twenty-foot distance. Every now and again, they'd pass by other local inhabitants, freezing them in the process. The fact that they hadn't come across any copyettes was concerning. Either they had found a way to remain invisible to Pansomething the copyette claimed impossible as a former world conqueror or they were already in place for their final task. Everyone considered the emperor all-powerful, yet his latest actions made it obvious that not to be the case.

Finally, the domain entrance became visible, like a purple transparent barrier.

REALM INVASION

Purple rectangles filled the air.

DALLION ELAZNI, EURYALE ELAZNI, and [??] have invaded the realm!

That's new, Dallion muttered as he rushed along the familiar streets.

Thanks to his high senses, he had already spotted half a dozen sun gold metalins making their way towards him. Their action was far slower than expected, allowing Dallion to ignore them as he continued towards the palace.

Just six of them? Euryale shared her husband's suspicions.

The rest must be at the event. Which means it's started. Pan, why can't the rectangles spot you?

We all have our secrets, the copyette replied. Just a trick I learned from home.

Whatever it is, you better teach it to me after this.

A massive rune golem statue suddenly emerged from a side street, blocking the way. Purple symbols formed on it, forming the start of a spell. Before it was anywhere near complete, Dallion thrust his harpsisword forward. A spark-infused droplet of water flew off the tip of the weapon, hitting the golem straight in the chest. Cracks emerged on the massive stone surface, as if Nox had been in a frenzy.

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion didn't stop, following up with a multi-attack.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

Purple rectangles flashed, disappearing in fragments of a second. The massive creature crumbled like a shattered pot, letting Dallion run right through it. Chunks of purple stone bounced off as if they were made of cork.

Trip him! a voice of power said in a language that only guardians would hear.

The emperor had made his first move. Ordering the city itself against Dallion might be considered smart. There was a time when Dallion would have agreed, yet there was one fatal flaw in the plan: it led Dallion to know exactly where the ruler was.

I'm not the one you should be worried about! Dallion responded, rushing in the general direction the empathy voice had come from. The place is full of copyette infiltrators.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

The presence of the other empath vanished. It was quickly replaced by waves of hatred emanating from every guardian within the city. Without pause or hesitation, he cast a flight spell, lifting

himself from the ground. No sooner had he done so, than several tiles on the road sank in an attempt to trip him up.

Hes activated the guardians. Dallion cast a second spell to pull the gorgon off the ground. Pan, on the other hand, had already done so on his own.

Naturally, that didnt stop tiles and other objects from randomly falling off nearby buildings as if there was a massive storm.

The good news was that from what Dallion could make out, the emperor wasnt in the palace. The bad news was that he was beyond it. That meant theyd have to dash past the massive structure and attract the attention of every golem, metalin, and overseer.

Had the archbishop foreseen this? It was a distinct possibility and would explain how Dallion had managed to get so far unimpeded. It was also possible that he was focusing all his attention on the emperor himself.

Nobles started emerging from their houses, attracted by the unusual noise going on. All that had the misfortune to look at the approaching trio were promptly petrified.

Guess they werent high levels, Dallion thought.

Careful! A spell emerged from Pan, covering a large area of the ground.

It was only at that point that Dallion spotted the overseer there. The platinum blond was three feet beneath the ground, wrapped in a reality bubble. The spell that the copyette had cast had trapped him below like a bubble in amber.

Any copyettes so far? No longer seeing the need for secrecy, Dallion rose above the town buildings, darting in the direction of the palace.

None I could sense.

That was unnerving. They should have spotted at least one by now.

Waves of bladerers filled up the sky, all charging at the invaders. Thousands of blades split the air, their movements as fast as a drop of water sliding down a glass.

The completionist in Dallion called out for him to kill off the pesky constructs and clear the sky before moving on. The pragmatist told him there was no point in doing so. At this level difference, the once dreaded entities couldnt even be described as annoyances. Neither they nor the spell casting golems on the ground were capable of even slowing him down. In the worst-case scenario, hed have to evade before launching a lethal counterattack, and that was only if Pan and Eury hadnt dealt with the matter for him.

Structures rose in the air, like pillars from the ground. Their speed wasnt nearly enough to hit anyone, but that wasnt their goal. Dallion could tell that the emperors plan was to block his advancement by erecting a series of walls. No, that wasnt it. There were far too many magic threads within several of the structures.

Pan, know that spell? Dallion shouted, sending a spark infused spiral attack forward.

The deadly blow shattered several buildings, creating a massive mark on the city.

Moments later the chunks of debris flew back up, like in reverse play, merging together to recreate the broken structures.

Massive symbols shone in purple, creating a five-circle spell that spread throughout the entire city.

Before it could fully release, three other spells were completed, surrounding Dallion, Euryale, and Pan with aether spheres. Then, the effects of the emperors casting took hold.

Aether threads crawled up the sphere area domains sphere, hardening it.

Dallion braced for secondary effects. Surely enough they came in the form of a gravity increase, pulling everything to the ground. The bladerers blades were the first to drop, as if attracted by a giant magnet, followed by the constructs themselves. None of them crashed; the closer to the ground they got, the slower their fall became, until they gently lay on the ground.

Gravity? Dallion wondered.

The spell didnt seem to have any effect on the local inhabitants. They were clearly visible rushing about the city, in panic and confusion as to what was going on. As far as they were concerned, their senses had to be lying to them. Despite the calamities throughout the world, the imperial capital had always been secure. Nothing had damaged a single building, and now it was being ripped apart by intense fighting.

No. Pan cast a new spell to boost the aether spheres forward, just as a new wave of bladerers rose to the sky. Obedience.

Whats that?

What do you do when the proof of destruction is everywhere around? You link into everyones personal realm and make them experience only what you want them to.

On closer observation, Dallion managed to notice the thin threads linking to the inhabitants he could see. Similar to the threads of corruption the void used, they linked everything within the domain to the realm itself, establishing full control. Even now, it was more important that the people remained loyal than them facing Dallion.

Seeing that brought a revelation. With the domain completely sealed, Tamin was going to use everythingsubject, construct, and guardianto attack, like antibodies within an organism. However, in doing so, he only made the city an even bigger target. The weakness of every city wasnt the buildings, but the people themselves. If enough were to be lost, the imperial capital could quickly turn into a town, leaving hundreds of structures to rot in the wilderness overnight.

Boosting the flight speed even more, Dallion flew past the palace wall. Spikes emerged from every solid surface, aiming to skewer him, yet none could touch him.

We'll need an opening to shoot the rockets before they hit the dome of the domain. If they do, they'll fry everything in here, us included.

A large arena-like structure became visible in the distance. It reminded Dallion of the one he had taken from Nerosal, only much larger.

There! Dallion, thought.

That had to be it. He had no memory of seeing the structure the last time he was here. The emperor must have created it specifically for the occasion. Given the size, it was large enough to hold a quarter of the city's inhabitants inside and would explain why there were so few of them.

Stop! strands of music shot out at Dallion. Passing through his aether bubble, they spun around in an attempt to entangle him.

Dallion could feel them bite into his skin and paralyze his muscles.

Break! He managed to say before his body became fully numb. Music strands of his own emerged, snapping the existing ones to bits. Instantly, he felt the missing parts of his body return to him. A split second later, his aether bubbles shattered, disappearing into nothingness.

Dal! Eury shouted, aiming one of her crossbows forward.

Dont! Dallion ordered, deliberately slowing down. Break the dome and find the copyettes. Ill be with you soon.

Anyone could feel Euryales reluctance to go. The brief burst of emotion couldnt be blocked by a dozen blocker items. Yet, she understood that arguing was pointless. Right or wrong, it was going to cost them time, and right now none of them had much of that.

The aether spheres of Eury and Pan whooshed past Dallion, heading straight to the grand arena. In the distance, waves of bladerers and metalins emerged, determined to prevent them from getting anywhere close to the emperor.

Come out, great-grandma! Dallion said. I know its you.

There was a long moment of silence, after which the old duchess slowly stepped out from behind the edge of the building. She was dressed in the ceremonial attire of Hosue Elazni, made entirely of ruby threads, sun gold, and sky silver. A robe depicting scenes of the second empress life covered the fine dress, the amount of magic threads within it suggesting that its purpose was more than decorative.

Why did you think its me? the duchess asked.

No one in the family managed to take your place, he said. I always knew there had to be a reason for it. He glanced at his right arm. The sting of the music attack could still be felt.

If you were just a little slower, it would all have ended here, the woman continued to walk forward. Every sound from her mouth was a thread of music, but unlike before, it didnt target Dallion, but herself, granting her lightness, strength, and determination. Youve grown a lot.

Theres no need for this. Im here to help the emperor, not fight him.

I know. A sad smile appeared on the old nobles face. Thats why I cant let you succeed.

Dallion blinked.

Youre working for the Order?

Was that one of the archbishops hidden copyettes? Surely Pan would have said so, if it were true.

Ever since the banishment of my daughter, I vowed to have my vengeance on this city for allowing it. The Order promised me that and also to protect all the members of my family that remained even that man.

Dallion could see it. How could he fault her for making the choice she had? In her eyes, the imperial capital with its constant webs of intrigue and politics was responsible for the fate of his grandmother and by extension, his mother as well. It was natural that she would seek a way to make it pay. Being too powerful to be tempted by the Star or the voids corruption, she hadn't gotten involved with the cults, but sought a greater power one that shared her goals.

The archbishop will kill you as well, Dallion said in a final attempt to change her mind.

I know. But my family will be safe. All those dear to me left the capital's domain the moment they heard your ruckus. Now there's only me left and everyone who should have known better.

Chapter 920: The Faceless Army

Spells flickered in the distance like fireworks as Pan and Eury kept hundreds of metalins at bay. Initially, there had been a few waves of new age battle mages involved as well, but most of them had been quickly petrified, falling to the ground like solid statues. The sad truth was that despite all their training, few of those present amounted to much. All the capable ones were on cloud forts on the empire's borders fighting the nymphs. What was left behind were the recently graduated and those with connections to stay where it was safe.

A series of rocket bolts shot up into the air, leaving trails of purple fire behind them. Explosions followed.

REALM DAMAGED

Shell integrity 72%

Obviously, it was going to take a bit more to create an opening.

Dallion struck forward with a point attack, aiming for Duchess Elazni. Before it could reach her, a web of music threads formed, distorting her surroundings. The strike curved slightly to the side, hitting a building behind her. Just as before, the remnants of the destroyed structures quickly returned to their previous state.

Music threads, Dallion said, noting the composition of the robe the woman was wearing. It seemed that magic wasn't the only thing integrated. It must have taken a true master to create such an item, possibly even an otherworlder.

A gift to the second empress by the emperor himself, the woman said.

The duchess was far below Dallion's level, but it hardly showed. The family heirlooms she was wearing helped her hold her own. It also helped that despite the stakes, Dallion couldn't make himself go a hundred percent all out. Not only was she family, but deep inside Dallion agreed with her reasoning. Days ago, he was of the same opinion, wanting to take the emperor down. Even now he wasn't particularly enamored with the prospect of allying with him. Sadly, the alternatives were worse.

What about Tors? Dallion let out a music attack, probing the strength of the robe. The strands were instantly caught in the mesh of music threads and snapped before they could achieve anything. Did you order him to kill me or did he decide that on his own?

Tors has always been too spoiled for his own good. There was a note of regret along with the music attacks aimed at Dallion.

Unlike her, he used his aura sword to slash them up before they could become a threat.

His skills made his parents pamper him, just as I did. The duchess launched a new wave of attacks. This time, they were targeting the environment around him, as well. The buildings on both sides of him collapsed, tilting in his direction. More strands of music attached to chunks of debris, dragging them towards him.

The whip blade hovering around Dallion extended quickly, severing their connections, causing them to fall to the ground. To be on the safe side, Dallion cast a spell to repel any remaining object. Before that could happen, the chunks flew back up, recreating the buildings yet again.

Im to blame, the Duchess sighed, for the first time skipping an attack. I never told him that he didnt have the hardness to be an archduke. I expected hed eventually grove over it. There was no way the emperor would have chosen him, even if he had selected our House to get the post. Hes there right now. The woman combat split, glancing over her shoulder in one instance.

The entire sky above the coliseum kept on flickering in orange and purple lights. Watching Pan, one couldnt doubt that at one point he had tried to take over the world. Strangely enough, it was only constructs that were engaging him. A substantial number of golems had rushed into the fray along with the waves of metalins and bladerers, yet no people.

REALM DAMAGED

Shell integrity 44%

Another wave of explosions blossomed.

Hes there right now, eagerly awaiting to get his title.

You didnt warn him? Dallion asked.

An instance of the Duchess shook her head.

There comes a time when indulgences must end.

Dallion burst into instances, expecting her to charge forward with an attack he hadnt seen. The woman did no such thing. Remaining in her spot with enough dignity that would make kingdoms envious, she summoned a lyra.

The instrument was made entirely of sun gold, with strings of Moon platinum. One look was enough to tell that it was an heirloom of the second empress. Dallion recognized the pitch of the laughter coming from within the guardian that had entered into the lyres realm the moment of its creation was a copyette.

Strings of music burst forward as the duchess played a chord. All of them were simultaneously mixed with spark and magic, twisted in such fashion that neither touched the other.

Damn it! Dallion thrust his harsisword forward, combining a spiral attack with music and spark.

Two extreme forces clashed in one another, causing a thread of destruction to appear perpendicular to them, slicing miles of the city on either side. Each attack was capable of leveling mountains, even

if they were of a completely different nature. Duchess Elaznis music was a soft force that could entangle and smother everything it targeted. Dallions was an example of hard, raw power.

Directed by Gleam, the whip blade danced in the air, slicing as many music threads as it could manage, but it wasn't close to enough. For every hundred it would snap, thousands more emerged as the woman continued to play.

Dallion took a step back, doing a multi-attack with his aura sword. Spell circles formed, shooting out shards of aether at the woman. The projectiles were caught by the music strands of her robe long before they could reach their target.

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It takes time to adjust to something new, the duchess said as she kept on playing. Even for you. The winner is not the one with the greater strength, but with more information. She took a step forward, effectively forcing Dallion to take one back. And the Order has been gracious in providing me with a lot.

Only two of her artifacts were in use. There was no telling how many more would come into play. A number of options ran through Dallions mind, each of them more creative than the last. All of them were fake paradigms. There was only one thing he had to decide whether he had the strength to crush his great-grandmother or not. For one thing, she didn't seem to be hesitating one bit.

Adzorg, Dallion said. Are you safe?

As safe as could be, dear boy, the mage replied.

Cast a protection spell.

Both Dallion and the duchess had the same level of music skill, but despite all her heirlooms, Dallion had something she didn't.

Just a bit more, he told himself, reaching out to consume a bit more of the Moonstone in his realm. Then, he let go of the weapon in his left hand and played a chord on the harpsisword.

Torrents of music wrapped in divine magic flowed forward. Once again, the two magic attacks met. This time Dallions was so much stronger that it shredded the lyres attack without contest. The entire robe that the duchess was wearing transformed into a multitude of threads in an attempt to form a protective cushion in front of her. That, too, failed, causing the attire to be ripped to shreds as well.

Stop! Dallion ordered, his voice still holding the powers of the Moonstone.

You used a Moonstone? The woman's expression remained unchanged. Hints of pride and confusion were mixed within. Why?

If I'm going to save this city, I can save my great-grandma as well, he replied. Sleep.

The woman attempted to resist, bursting into over a hundred instances in the hopes that one of them would manage to withstand the music attack. Unfortunately for her, none of them did.

REALM DAMAGED

Shell integrity 16%

Another rectangle flashed in the distance. The domains boundaries were dangerously close to shattering. All it would take was one more hit. Of course, that was just the easy part.

SENTIMENTALITY

(+2 Empathy)

Still a softy at heart. Try not to change too much.

See you later, Duchess. Dallion cast several aether spheres around her, then sent them floating up in the air. Being there would keep her a lot safer than anywhere else.

Without even bothering to look around, he darted towards the grand arena. As he got closer, he quickly saw that the victory wasn't as clear cut as he thought. There could be no doubt that his companions were keeping hundreds at bay, but not without a cost. Several healing circles were glowing around both Pan and Eury, yet even with all the healing, their health was close to half full.

Spotting his approach, three imperial rune golems changed the target of their attacks, flying straight in his direction. Pieces of thick aether armor appeared on them, along with massive melee weapons.

Stop! Dallion ordered.

The music strands bounced off the hardened aether without effect.

They must have revoked your mage authority after your recent visit, Adzorg commented.

Funny. Dallion summoned his ray of destruction cylinders and broke one.

The spell was instantly cast, shooting through two of the golems, then continuing on to the horizon. Reaching the boundaries of the domain, it stopped, crashing into the invisible barrier.

REALM RESTORED

Shell integrity 22%

Shit! Dallion thought.

I could have told you that, Pan remarked. The shell drains magic. Direct aether spells make it stronger. I used something similar at the time.

Any reason you didn't share that sooner?

Moon vows, the copyette replied. At least now you know.

Yeah. Now I know.

Another volley of bolts shot up. The explosion was twice as powerful as before, setting the entire sky ablaze.

REALM DAMAGED

Shell destroyed!

That was it. Now the city stood a chance. All that remained was to make sure that the emperor did.

Lux! Dallion summoned the bladebow. Take the crates and follow Eury.

Sure thing, boss!

Gem, he summoned the atherfish as well. Take Eury up there.

Okay, boss

Will you be alright? Dallion asked.

Yeah, his wife replied. You just make sure nothing hits us.

Count on it.

Slashing the air, Dallion sent a line attack above the arena building. A majority of the golems managed to avoid the attack, their speed and magic skills better than many of the new battle mages he had seen.

The thought posed an interesting question. With everything going on, there were three things that were supposed to be happening, yet they weren't. The Shimmering Circle had to be present at an event of this magnitude if nothing else, Alien should have been. The overseers were also suspiciously quiet. There had been too few of them so far, and none had taken any action since the group had neared the arena. Strangest of all, other than a few minor tricks, the emperor hadn't used his full domain ruler powers. After the initial city spell, Dallion expected buildings to fly at him like bullets, massive spires to emerge from the ground. If he were in Tamins shows, he'd have every pool of water turn into a water sprout, while every creature and insect filled the space between.

A thin layer of magic covered the top of the arena, making it impossible to see through.

Ready, Pan? Dallion kept on moving through the air faster than a hummingbird. Blades and spells flew everywhere around him, none able to hit its target.

What about them? Three bolts of purple lightning emerged from the copyettes humanoid body, striking a large metal in three spots along the torso.

Ignore them. Dallion flew forward.

There was no telling what additional effects the spell could have, that was why Dallion wasn't the first one to go through. Instead, he summoned Nox.

Thirty cublings emerged all over his body. Several of them leaped forward, claws extended. Cracks formed along the reflective surface, spreading like spiderwebs. Then, to Dallion's great surprise, the spell collapsed, revealing hundreds of thousands of people beneath.

More nobles than people had seen in their lifetimes were all in one place, sitting with blank expressions on their faces. The spell that had been created by the city seemed to be draining their magic then Dallion remembered the shell needed magic to function. It would probably get rebuilt within minutes. Thankfully, Eury would already be on the outside by then.

In the center of the arena, surrounded by a dozen legion generals, stood the emperor. Despite the bright glow, Dallion could still see a confident smile on the ruler's face. A dozen steps away, Aba stood, kneeling down. Beyond him were two circles of guards and beyond them, close to fifty overseers.

We didn't think you'd make it here, Emperor Tamin said. Seems we'll have our duel, after all.

Is it the generals? Dallion asked, still covered in a pack of cracklings.

No Pan replied. Its the overseers.

Which ones?

All of them