

Leveling up 791

Chapter 791: The Darkness Within

Damn it, old man! Dallion moved his fingers, summoning his armadil shield.

The piece of gear instantly emerged next to Dallion, pushing the air currents away from his body. Without wasting a moment, he took advantage of the modicum of freedom to draw his thread splitter and Nox dagger, then slash his constraints in one action. The air threads vanished, destroyed by the lethal edges of the blades, but it was already too late. Adzorg had gone, leaving Dallion with a simple binary choice: follow or not.

Nil! Dallion shouted out of habit, but the echo within his realm had gone as well.

Making the best of his mind trait, Dallion mentally went through the options. If he were to go into the tunnel, there was a high chance that he'd catch up to the old mage. That would grant him an explanation, if nothing else. Could he afford the risks, though? Dallion knew nothing about the timepiece. The archmage had spent his entire life gathering information from the fallen south to gradually get it to the state it was now. Before that, the first Star had created something similar, but at a higher price. If Dallion were to walk through, there was no telling what he could expect. Would he end up back on Earth? Would he be lost in the void somewhere? As his only case of world travel had indicated, splitting wasn't ideal for finding out, either.

Staying, on the other hand, meant he had to rely entirely on the mage and when it came to the device, he didn't have the best record.

Harp, shield, will you get hurt if I go after him? Dallion asked.

Even before their answer, he concentrated on the space in front of him. There remained a minute chance that Adzorg maintained a link to his ring library. If that was the case, he'd be able to follow it even out of this world.

Millions of threads too minuscule to be seen by the naked eye emerged. The effort caused Dallion's eyes to sting, yet it was a price worth paying. Within the otherworldly glow, entire ecosystems of magic threads existed throughout the entire timepiece, like corals within a giant reef. Each contained information, explaining how certain elements worked, what would happen seconds away, where the energy came from. He could even see multiple cases of otherworldly threads, shimmering in the same fashion everything from another world did. Smaller than anything else in existence, they contained information that was completely illegible—possibly the secret of traveling between worlds?

Dull pain quickly appeared in Dallion's temples, spreading along the sides of his head. The lure of knowledge hadn't enticed him as much as it had Adzorg, but if he could learn a bit more about the way the device functioned, maybe he would.

Don't! The harpsisword moved on its own accord, causing Dallion to take a step back.

The action was so sudden and unexpected that it caused Dallion to drop his thread splitter to the ground. Never before had the nymph acted in such a fashion, openly using magic in the real world.

Don't leave the world! The guardians' vibrations formed words.

What will happen to me?

The nymph didn't respond, but Dallion could sense her desperation. She didn't want to say the words, but was asking him to remain where he was and let everything play out.

I think you should go, Vihrogon joined in reluctantly. Even if he knows what he's doing, there's no guarantee Adzorg will be able to finish it. He failed once before.

You want me to go? Dallion looked down at the shield.

It's your choice, as always. There's no telling whether it's right or wrong. As a companion guardian, I just know you well enough to say that if you don't go, you'll hate yourself for the rest of your life, no matter the outcome.

There was a bit of that. With the exception of the first few moments in his awakened room, Dallion had never felt any urge to go back home. The few instances he'd even considered it were as a result of external factors: Jiroh's desire to go home, Eurys mention of her world, even a few of his awakening trials. Logically, there was no reason for him to change his mind now and yet, seeing the rectangular portal a few steps away made him wonder.

Why don't you want me to go, Harp? he asked.

The guardian remained silent.

Harp?

Still undecided, Dallion bent down, reaching for his thread cutter. No matter her answer, he still felt better having his gear close at hand. To his surprise, upon doing so, he saw a small black thread emerging from his hand. Almost invisible in the current light, the thread resembled a stray hair that had stuck to his hand at some point. Unfortunately, it was no hair; it continued onward, making its way to the armadil shield on the floor.

As the realization hit Dallion, many things occurred at once. Splitting into instances, the otherworlder scattered in all directions. The fingers of his left hand moved to cast a protection spell, while he also reached for his Aura sword. Water covered the harpsisword, as it also prepared to engage in combat. At the same time, black roots and vines exploded from the armadil shield, mercilessly entangling both swords as well as the thread cutter. Several clusters even tried to do the same with Dallion himself. It was only thanks to the vast number of instances and Dallion's quick reactions that he managed to remain free.

I'm sorry, Dal, the armadil changed form, transforming into Vihrogon. He no longer had the causal appearance of a companion guardian, though. Clad in armor of black wood and void matter, he was a warrior now a field marshal. I couldn't allow you to destroy the device.

Void matter? You're a cultist? Dallion asked, summoning the only large weapon he had at his disposal his hammer. Lux! He ordered mentally.

No. I serve the void, he said.

You're the new Star? Lux, come on!

No. You're the new Star. You always were intended to be. The reason Arthurows was so insistent that you join him was because he was told to. A cluster of vines shot at the timepiece. Before they could touch it, though, the light of the portal increased, causing them to wither into smoke. It was also why he wanted to kill you. There could only be one Star at a time, and he dreaded that you'd take his place. Sadly, for him, he was right.

The void in Arthurows memory fragment that had to be the voids doing. Dallion always suspected that the change was only partially voluntary. Now there could be no doubt. Of all the entities, he never expected Vihrogon to turn out to be a voidling.

Splitting, Dallion imbued his hammer with spark and threw it at the dryad. Several clusters of vines emerged, merging together into a shield. It wasn't enough to stop the weapon outright, but bit by bit it slowed it down, more emerging behind, until it remained completely still.

Not this reality, Dallion thought, shifting to another instance. Instead, he focused on what was within his power to sever the connection between the shield and his realm.

LINK CANNOT BE SEVERED

A purple rectangle emerged.

It's no use. I'm too deep. I've had millennia to slowly grow to the point that I am part of your realm. A wooden cycle appeared in his left hand. It was painful, but it had to be done.

You're saying it hurt you more than it hurt me? Dallion put away his Nox dagger, then attempted to cast one of Adzorg's destructive spells. It was only at the very end that he stopped. As much as such a spell would help him, he was no longer in a vortex.

In more than one way. Acquiring magic and having the Moonstone in your realm caused constant physical pain. That wasn't the worst of it, though. The dryad glanced at the timepiece. He was closer to it than Dallion, but it had shown to be capable of dealing significant damage. Also, there was still the matter of Adzorg; there was no telling when exactly the mage might return. It was having to corrupt someone who didn't deserve it.

Lux, Gem, Ruby! Dallion kept calling out for his familiars, but none of them responded. Not even his echoes replied.

When? he asked. When did you start?

Ever since you linked me to your realm.

All that time ago?

You're lying. Aether shards flew from Dallion's hand, targeting the vines that kept the harpsword captive. While they did manage to destroy part of the void matter, it proved not enough to break free to Harp.

I was subtle. I didn't have void back then, remaining nothing but a conduit. A hint here, a hint there he gestured with his sickle as he spoke. On a few occasions, you put me in a position to do more and I did. The herbology gem, for example.

What about it?

There really wasn't much you could see, the dryad sighed, shaking your head. So reckless, lacking magic, and an otherworlder. There was no way the void wouldn't want you.

What about the herbology gem?

I gave it to Arthurows.

Dallion thought back.

The two-crown had both gems when you found it.

The guardian lied to me. Dallion gritted his teeth.

He didn't have any choice. Even now, after all this time, the realm remains mine. Even without the void, I could control the guardians forcibly if needed. He threw his sickle at the dial of the device. A flash surrounded the weapon, though not enough to vaporize it. Instead, the tip of the wooden blade hit the metal surface, then bounced off. The rest of your accomplishments were your own, though. The void wanted you to grow and develop naturally.

That's the reason you were always protecting me, isn't it? Dallion infused his hammer with spark. As he did, he kept on splitting, constantly attacking the dryad while the conversation continued. In turn, the former guardian did the same, countering every potential attack.

I wasn't the only one protecting you for selfish reasons. Although, I did like you.

You're the voice that has been guiding me, aren't you?

No. Deep sadness emanated from the being. I was never the voice, just someone who listened to it.

Another sickle materialized.

Please don't resist, Vihrogon said. Despite all the lies, there's one truth that Arthurows said: it's a lot less painful if you don't struggle.

Yeah, right.

I was once like you. I believed in what I was doing helping my emperor conquer the world. He was the one to heal the world after the copyette and nymph wars. I told myself that it was worth sacrifices, even questionable alliances. Then, at one point, I saw what I had become a jailor that had imprisoned millions of his own race within a sword in the name of that goal. It was at that point that I knew I had gone too far.

Seventy of Dallion's instances charged at the dryad, attacking with the hammer. A few of them even managed to strike the ground with a point attack strong enough to create a hole to the lower layer. Alas, that hadn't helped; Vihrogon merely shot out enough vines to keep himself and Adzorgs device in their present location, while entire buildings tumbled to the floor below.

Not that reality, Dallion thought.

Realizing that you've become the greatest horror takes its toll, the dryad continued. You went through something like it and you still haven't fully recovered. I took it worse. That's when the void made me an offer: remove all the pain and memories of my past. The price was to serve as its eyes and ears, and do any task it requests as long as it doesn't involve killing. He let out a bitter laugh. I

never expected that I'd become banished so soon after, but even as an item guardian, the deal held true. At least until the time you forced me to defeat the birch dryad and regain my memories.

Vihrogon tossed his wooden sickle at the device. This time, it managed to hit one of the large metal sections, piercing it partially.

That's what this is about? Thousands of magic symbols were dancing in Dallion's mind, assembling to create a wholly new spell. He had never read or seen that spell cast before, he just knew it was possible, just as he knew that it held the greatest chance of him doing any actual damage to the guardian. Rather, damage was not the correct word. At this point, all he aimed to do was break the link to the void.

Vihrogon had been right when he said Dallion had been blind. The otherworld hadn't figured out Adzorg's obsession before the Academy incident. He hadn't even noticed the darkness the dryad had brought into his realm. If it wasn't for the boost of his magic trait, he'd still remain clueless. However, if there was one thing he could tell it was when he was facing a puppet.

Is that what the void used to get you to corrupt me?

No, Dal. A sword of void matter emerged in the dryad's hand. It held a remarkable resemblance to the first aura sword Dallion had ventured into. My task is to activate the device. The void will take care of everything else once it floods this world.

Chapter 792: The Dryad Noble

Dozens of Dallion's instances charged at the dryad. The hammer swung, destroying wave after wave of void vines, to no avail. There was no telling what the values of Vihrogon's traits were, but there was no doubt that he had been a high-ranking noble. At present, a large part of his focus was on keeping Harp and the other guardians in check, yet still he was proving to be a difficult opponent. More than that, he was what Nil would call a strategist, dedicating just the necessary amount of power to achieve victory. If it were anyone else, Dallion would have called him overconfident. In truth, the dryad was far from it.

Dallion grabbed the magic threads of the nearest statue. The boost in power wasn't necessary, but very much welcomed for what he had in mind.

That's how you were watching me, weren't you, voice? Dallion asked mentally.

He had often wondered how the cultists, and especially the Star, knew so much; how he'd figured out Dallion's location even when he himself didn't know where he was. All his trips through the wilderness, nearly all of his conversations, his actions, even his awakening trials might as well have been recorded by the shield guardian.

The scariest part was that at no point had anyone suspected.

More vines shot out from the dryad, targeting the timepiece. The protective light was no longer burning them up, like it had before. Two times out of ten, the void elements would even manage to interact with some piece or another before they were destroyed.

The device won't work if Adzorg destroys it, Dallion slid on his blocker ring.

It's rather the opposite. That's precisely when it'll work. With half of its presence outside of the world, the device is effectively useless. With effort, it can create a problem or two, but that's about it.

Vihrogon moved even closer to the side of the device, avoiding the rectangular portal. Oh, itll be bad for the local inhabitants, but not on a world aspect. Once all the device is here, itll be able to open one last portal.

To the void.

Yes, the prophecy everyone feared, the dryad let out a bitter laugh. The nymphs were big on prophecies. When I was young and nave, I tried to find as many of them as I could, possibly hoping that would let me change the future. But only the present can change the future. The prophecies are nothing but a skill to see potential echoes of the world. Very useful in the short run, but they cant last for more than a few hours.

His left hand hidden, Dallion started composing his spell. Ten simultaneous instances did it, while all the rest continued with the fight.

I have a way to fix this, Dallion said, using his music skills to fill his words with hope, understanding, and a touch of sadness. Ive done it before.

You think that if you defeat me, you can purge the void? One of Vihrogons instances shook his head. Companion gear know everything about their owners, even before they know it themselves. Youll try something new and out of the box to fight me. He glanced at the harpsisword wrapped in black vines. Id guess youll try to free her. Theres a good chance Id lose to her in a direct fight, now that youve reached an adequate level. Dont bother. Theres no point.

It worked on the overseer.

I know youll try. The dryad hesitated. One of his vines had managed to wrap itself around the timepiece. Whatever method the guardian was using, it had adapted to the defenses Adzorg had placed. Thats one of your best qualities, and your burden. Dont challenge me, I dont deserve it. Another vine shot around the large magic artifact. And youre not strong enough to take me.

I can, if I use the Moonstone.

A fragment of fear emanated from the dryad. He had seen firsthand what a Moonstone was capable of. On the other hand, he also knew that Dallion wouldnt use it unless the situation was dire. Using the stone would mean hed have to face the Azure Federation battlemage without it.

If Adzorg were here, hed probably go on a tirade about how Moonstones were not to be wasted for cheap boosts, although given the circumstances, maybe even he would understand.

Nox, Dallion whispered. Not sure you can hear me buddy, but if you can, I want you to attack shield in my realm.

As he expected, there was no response.

Dont get yourself killed, just distract him a bit.

A faint glow emerged within the portal of the timepiece. Time slowed to a crawl. Everyone knew what would follow: the return of Adzorg, triggering the real clash. Vihrogon would try and activate the device, while Dallion and the old mage were going to attempt and destroy it. Everything was a matter of timing.

Dallion concentrated. The glow became a flickering, which slowed down to regular pulses of light. With each one, he was able to write about twenty symbols, moving closer to the completion of the spell.

Vihrogon had also reacted to the change of the portal in his own fashion, shooting out a lot more vines and roots at the device. All the time, his battle with Dallion continued in the background, hundreds of instances clashing into one another in a game of violent chess. Then, after what seemed like hours, Adzorg emerged.

A flash of purple light swept through the area, destroying all instances in its path.

Now

, Dallion thought as he completed the spell. For a fraction of a second, an incandescent glow surrounded him, then moved aside, splitting off into an entirely new entity made of magic.

Gripping his hammer, Dallion charged at the dryad. The light surrounding the entity quickly faded, causing an identical copy of him to become visible. Roots shot up from the ground in an attempt to entangle it, but the second Dallion quickly cast a flight spell, quickly moving out of their reach.

Destroy the device! Dallion shouted, able to split into instances once more. His hammer flew right at the head of the dryad, who only stopped it with an armadil shield of his own that materialized on his left arm.

Determined to maintain his initiative, the dryad darted at the old mage, attacking him with a series of slashes. There was no telling whether Adzorg had figured out what was going on, but he definitely wasn't going to allow himself to be slaughtered.

All of Vihrogons attacks bounced off the old mans body, causing a momentary glow to surround him.

An echo? Adzorg asked as he burst into a dozen copies of himself. Where did you learn that, dear boy?

In truth, Dallion wasn't precisely sure. It was almost as if the knowledge of the spell had popped in there after he'd had his magic trait boosted. Sadly, he couldn't call his creation fully successful. While he had used magic to create a magic version of himself, draining the magic threads of a statue in the process, he had failed to make it autonomous. Right now, he was controlling it, almost like he was controlling an instance.

Two sets of spells focused on the harpsisword, aiming to loosen the vines, and once again failed to achieve the desired effect. That wasn't Dallion's main goal, though. Gripping the hammer with both hands, he attacked the dryad directly.

Sword and hammer clashed as all instances clustered in one single spot. Those with the ability to see would describe thousands of strikes exchanged between them in a matter of seconds. Attacks, evasions, barriers, blocks. There could be no doubt that Dallion had improved tremendously since his experience in the world swords. Unfortunately, his skills were still not adequate to earn him victory.

Three against one, the dryad said. Just like the time you faced Katka.

It was three hunters against a mage back then. Dallion managed to say.

And now its three mages against a noble. Which do you think has a greater chance?

Dallions hammer whooshed an inch from the dryads face, slamming into the timepiece. Several segments shot off, flying straight up through the ceiling of rock and metal.

Careful! Adzorg shouted, targeting the dryad with spells of his own. Break it and youll cause the vortex!

Destroying it was supposed to prevent the vortex! Dallion shouted back through his construct.

Only if I dismantle it!

Finding it a better option than having the dryad activate it, Dallion struck the device again. This time, though, the hit was accompanied by a cluster of roots shooting up from the ceiling and entangling the weapon. For over a second, the spark infused in it would burn them off at contact, until it was overwhelmed by their sheer number.

Vihrogons blade descended on Dallions shoulder. Slicing through his protective magic barriers, it bit into his flesh, then continued until reaching bone. The scary part wasnt that the dryad had managed to render all of his defenses useless, but that he hadnt gone through with the strike. Had he wanted to, Dallions arm would have already been on the floor.

I know youll struggle, the dryad said in one instance. I wish there was another way, but there isnt. The Moons will be destroyed and youll become the voids Stars.

Stars?

By the sound of it, it seemed that Adzorg was also included in the deal. Clearly, the void had a twisted sense of humor.

Ill use the Moonstone! Dallion attempted to leap back, but a set of roots shot up from the floor and ceiling, entangling his torso. In over a hundred instances, he tried to evade them, yet in all he failed.

You might, Vihrogon said, a flicker of sadness passing through his face. Taking Dallions hand, he removed the blocker ring from his finger. But then youll lose the next battle. In the end, the void always

Thats because you dont know how Ill use it.

Vermillion! Dallion ordered mentally.

Incandescent purple light filled the room, as the Moonstone emerged on Dallions neck. Even with the shield guardian wrapping all his echoes and familiars in webs of void, there was one creature in his realm that he had ignored: the Vermillion island serpent.

One thought was enough to transfer the Moonstone chunk from Dallions realm into the real world. While still on a chain around his neck, the ring remained in contact with his skin, and that proved sufficient. It was a tremendous risk. There was no telling whether it would be strong enough to weaken the void matter with its presence alone. Thankfully, it did.

Roots withered and snapped, allowing Dallion to break three. Taking advantage of the situation, Adzorg and Dallions construct also sprang into action. The old mage flew towards the dial of the timepiece, while the second Dallion directed his attack at the vines holding the harpsisword.

Now the sword! Dallion put on the Vermillion ring.

A hilt of silver glass emerged from his left hand. Dallion grabbed it with his right, then infused it with spark as he slashed at Vihrogons neck. The attack was successful, sinking half an inch into the dryads flesh. It was as hard as wood something Dallion wasnt aware that the dryads could do.

Unfortunately, the shield guardian hadnt remained idle. What seemed to be a step back to move away from the Moonstones deadly glow turned out to be the start of an attack that resulted in Adzorg losing both his hands. The old man didnt yell, he didnt even flinch, but the damage was done.

Two can play, the dryad said with an air of blood-thirst that Dallion had never sensed from him before. I told you I dont deserve to be saved.

Vines wrapped around the sword of silver glass, shattering it to pieces. Thankfully, Dallion had split into instances in time to avoid another capture. Under the protection of the Moonstones glow, he leaped back and to the side. His construct, however, wasnt as lucky. Two feet away from the harpsisword, clusters of roots shot up, entangling it mid-air. Even so, both his hands remained free, which was enough for a quick spell.

Too bad, Dallion said, casting a single circle creation spell. Ill do it, anyway.

Chapter 793: Beyond the Level Cap

It could be said that technology was based on weakness. With awakened looking over the population, there never was a need for complex and intricate devices. Binoculars, magnifying lenses, even glasses were vastly unnecessary. Everyone with a high perception could see hundreds of times better than a pair of Earth binoculars; meanwhile, everyone with low perception had no reason to put in the effort. That was the reason Vihrogon wasnt even able to imagine Dallions plan.

The dryads roots and vines crushed the otherworlders magic construct, though not before it had summoned a perfect lens of glass. Dallion himself had summoned one more, focusing the light emanating from the Moonstone on his neck to the sole target that could turn things around the harpsisword.

Got you, he whispered.

A single dot of light hit the vines surrounding the weapon, but it was enough for several layers of them to burst into purple flames. A loud crunch sounded, reducing the magical construct to aether dust, but it was already too late. The opening barely the size of a pinprick released a stream of water. Barely noticeable at first, the stream grew, ripping up its confines. It wasnt a sword that emerged, however, but rather a nymph in full battle gear.

At the sight of her, Vihrogon visibly tensed up. The shield strapped to his left arm disappeared as a second aura sword emerged in his hand.

I feared this might happen, he said, plates of void matter forming a set of full scale armor over his body. But in a way, I was looking forward to it. A fight against you its everything one could hope for.

Harp charged forward, slashing through vines and roots as she did. Not once did she pause to defend. There was no need to.

Over two hundred dryad instances attempted to attack in various fashions. A large number even managed to get a hit in, but the wound received in return was always greater than that afflicted, forcing Vihrogon to select something else to become reality.

Keep behind me. Sounds came from the skin of the nymph forming words. Help the mage destroy it.

Dallion nodded, but before he could take a step towards the timepiece, the floor burst up in several places. It wasn't roots that came from it, though, but new types of entities made entirely of wood.

It's just like the stories say. All but two of the dryads instances vanished.

What the heck is going on? Dallion wondered. Removing his blocker ring, he attempted to call out to any of the echoes within his realm, but to no avail. Vihrogon was still keeping a stranglehold on them.

His concern didn't last long as several of the newly emerged saplings charged right at him, their limbs transforming into wooden blades. Refocusing several of his instances, Dallion parried and counterattacked, aiming to chop through the pesky creatures. Sadly, despite their size and flimsy appearance, they proved a lot nimbler and more combat ready than he gave them credit for. Fighting them was like fighting someone at his awakened level: persistently difficult, though not impossible to defeat. Numbers remained their greatest obstacle, with several attacking Dallion all at once. Spells and skill combinations helped to keep him relatively protected, though not to the degree that allowed him to reach the device.

How about some fire, Dallion thought, extending his magic threads through the hammer. The process was a lot cruder than using the aura sword, but still managed to create a torrent of flames that burned through several saplings, striking the timepiece behind them.

Reality distorted, shifting for a fraction of a second, as dozens of elements flew out of the timepiece, creating their own bubbles of reality in the process.

Damn it, boy! Adzorg shouted. He too was dealing with the creatures, but had the foresight to use spells that broke them down without putting the timepiece at risk. Careful with that!

It's not like I have a choice! Dallion continued with a multi attack piercing the sapling in front of him. Unfortunately, the creatures wounds healed just as fast as they appeared. The only positive effect of all that was that the attacks prevented the sapling from doing anything but step back. Can you stop it?

That's not the point! Now that it's active, every part that breaks off has the power to create a low level rip within the reality of the world, which

Vihrogon's body slammed against the timepiece. His entire back exploded in black steam, affected by the device's active portal. Based on the number of injuries, it was obvious he was on the losing side.

What the heck? Dallion split into a few more instances to look around.

Harp fared better, although she had earned herself a number of wounds as well, spreading from several points on her body like cracks. It was rare for Dallion to see her wounded, but what was even more beyond belief was that it had been mere seconds since the two had started their fight. One could only imagine the speed at which they had exchanged blows and what sort of attacks they had used to render each other to such a state.

An armadil shield formed in front of Vihrogon, only to get half shattered by the nymphs strike. Dozens of timepiece fragments burst into the air, disappearing almost on the instant. The edge of her blade had made it through a thick chunk of sky silver all the way into the dryads shoulder.

This was it. Dallion didnt need to see a white rectangle to know that Vihrogons health was at its limits. Even so, the void compelled him to keep his hold on the otherworlders realm. The next strike would put an end to that, but the outcome would be different depending on who made it .

Enjoy your feast, Nox! Dallion concentrated, drawing the Nox dagger and throwing it at the dryads neck in one swift action.

In that single moment, the speed was greater than anyone could imagine faster than the saplings, faster than Vihrogon, or even Harp. A few vines emerged, a final reflexive attempt to block the blade, but the crackling ate through them as if they were made of air. Mercilessly, it pierced its target, continuing on into the timepiece.

A spiderweb of black cracks emerged, continuing along Vihrogons body as well as the device.

ARMADIL SHIELD Level increased

The ARMADIL SHIELD has been improved to level 3

An explosion followed, swallowing everything in purple light.

Damn it! Dallion shouted, shielding his eyes.

It was only now that he realized. The double vortex that he and Adzorg had fought to escape a day ago had, in fact, been created by him by this very fight, resulting in the destruction of the timepiece device. He would undoubtedly survive, along with everyone else nearby: Adzorg, Harp, Ruby, even Vihrogon. The rest of the city, though, would be consumed by a smoldering crater. All those who had failed to flee the city would likely have perished.

It was inevitable, a young voice said.

Turning around, Dallion saw a teen dressed in a pair of blue jeans and an electric blue t-shirt. He could almost pass for a human if his hair and eyes werent glowing blue.

You witnessed the gleam, so you knew the real thing would come sooner or later. It just happened to be sooner.

Dallion remained still. Even his thoughts had frozen as he realized he was standing face to face with the Blue Moon himself.

Was there a reason to do it? the Moon continued.

I ruptured the world bubble? Dallion asked in horror.

You destroyed the device that created the rupture only on the vague notion that leveling up the dryad might purge the void within him.

Its supposed to, Dallion thought. It had worked for the overseer. But maybe he was wrong? The overseer had the ability to control void matter on her own accord, Vihrogon was just a guardian who had no such ability. Was it possible that all he had achieved was to make the armadil shield stronger?

Did it work? Dallion dared to ask.

Yes, it worked. But it also puts you in a precarious situation.

The curse Dallion tried to look away, but for some reason he found he couldnt. There was something about the Blue Moon that kept him focused on the avatar.

The boy reached out into the air, grabbing hold of a blue soda can that just appeared there.

Did you ever figure out what caused it? He opened it with the typical hissing sound everyone on Earth was familiar with.

Dallion shook his head.

Finally, an honest answer. The Moon took a sip. Since theres no point in keeping it secret any longer, Ill tell you. The curse wasnt accepting the shield. You could have been more careful, but you managed to keep the void at bay with your actions. The point at which you messed up was when you welcomed it in order to gain strength.

The voice Dallion clenched his fists.

The voice was part, but it was when you set off to kill the Star. I know the saying goes that you have to fight fire with fire, but when it comes to voice, things never work out. Even with all your tricks and devices, you were slowly turning into the new Star. Even without this event, you would have succumbed to it in a few years.

Im dead, arent I, Dallion wondered. Thats why he was having this conversation. The blast that had created the double vortex hadnt spared him after all.

What really pissed me off was you thinking that you considered us nothing but divine slot machines. A sharp edge appeared in the Moons words. Say a prayer, get a boon, save you from the mess youve made. Green pampered you too much, despite knowing better.

Thats why you cursed me.

Cursed you? Dal, all we did was take away the benefits we gave you. We didnt curse you, you did that yourself. We never cursed anyone.

Never cursed anyone? That was difficult to believe. Dallion knew many people who were cursed. Him, Adzorg, Cleric, Havoc, half of Nerosal There was no way that the Moons werent involved. They were the reason three of the seven races had been banished.

The first explosion of the timepiece was the reason for Adzorg to be obsessed with it, the Moon said. All the fragments that were scattered throughout the world were linked to him, driving him to

reunite with them. You capped yourself for short-term gains. You were able to defeat the Star, and even gained an impossible skill in the process. Not bad, everything considered.

So that was the reason. It wouldn't be the first time for someone to tell Dallion that he had been blind. This time, he could see how much that was true. He had spent all that time wondering what was wrong with him, searching for the reason, all the time doing the exact thing that had caused the problem in the first place.

Some insist that it was pure luck that you broke it. Ive decided to give you the benefit of the doubt.

Broken the curse? Dallion blinked.

Why else would I be talking to you?

To tell me where I went wrong?

If the Moons spent all their time telling people where they went wrong, it would take us an eternity. For the first time, the Blue Moon let out a smirk. No, Im here because youve found a shortcut that wasnt supposed to exist.

I dont

Before Dallion could finish, three green rectangles emerged in front of him.

VOID PURGER

You have purged the void within your realm. Youre now able to take advantage of the achievement: VANQUISHER OF NAUGHT

VOID GUARDIAN KILLER

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

You have destroyed a void guardian, reclaiming him as your own. Thats a new one. Theres really nothing more to add.

You have broken through your eightieth barrier.

You are Level 80.

Choose the trait you value the most.

(Due to your leveling up, your magic trait has been reduced to 84)

Do you understand now? The Moon went next to Dallion. Because of your OP achievements, youve made it all the way to your next awakening gate. Your predicament is that you need to decide whether to pass through or not.

Chapter 794: Level 80

The next gate Once Dallion went through it, he would join the ranks of nobilitynot the hereditary farce reserved for family members, but the real thing. There was no telling what would change once he did. No one past a gate spoke about it except to those who had done so as well. There was a time when Dallion yearned to find himself in such a position. Even before joining the Academy, the final awakening trials had proved way too difficult for him to pass. It wasnt merely a matter of finding

the right question. The execution also proved beyond his abilities. The Blue Moon wasn't exaggerating when he said he'd combined a series of events that weren't supposed to occur.

In the world, there were impossibly few achievements that increased one's awakening level. Dallion had practically gone through all of them: destroying a Star's echo, defeating the Star himself, destroying a living colossus in the real world, and now upgrading a void guardian. There was a reason for the Blue Moon to be pissed.

Do I have to choose now? Dallion asked.

You have a reason not to? The faint amusement on the Moon's face abruptly disappeared.

It's a bit sudden.

What is there to think? Either you want to join the ranks of nobility and find out what it's about, or you are comfortable with the safety of your current situation. You're not an imperial, so you haven't made a vow to relinquish your nobility.

Relinquish? Dallion couldn't help himself from thinking.

Rules are rules. Imperial officers almost exclusively come from noble circles. Emperor Tamin requires them to vow to refuse the choice when it happens, capping them at level eighty. It's extremely annoying.

The explanation went a long way for Dallion to understand why the imperial troops were so feared. They were pretty much nobles that weren't nobles. No doubt they were lacking a certain number of awakened powers, but even so they remained a force to be reckoned with; not to mention that they spent a lot of time in the wilderness, unlike the majority of sheltered awakened.

So I must decide now.

I didn't say that. The Moon waved the green rectangles away, replacing them with seven new ones. Choose your trait. Things half done are annoying.

The notion had completely skipped Dallion's mind. So many major things had happened that the once-cherished single-point trait boost seemed rather inconsequential. Still, he upped his empathy to fifty-five. That left it and his perception in the mid-fifties, while all the rest were around the eighty mark.

There's no time limit, the Moon sighed. It just annoys me.

Everything seems to annoy you, Dallion thought.

Stupidity annoys me, the boy added sharply. You're like those people who beat the odds and find a winning lottery ticket, but are afraid to use it. He turned around. There is no deadline. Sort of. You don't have to choose now, but until you do, you can't go back to your realm, or any other realm. Think of it as an incentive to make up your mind fast.

Will I still be able to use my

You'll still be able to use your awakening powers, including the Vermillion ring hack.

Thank you. Dallion nodded.

There was a pause. The Moon looked over his shoulder, then turned around. Being thanked didn't seem like something that occurred often, which was strange. Given all the people that prayed at the Orders temples every day, one would think there'd be more of that.

Slowly, the boy made his way to Dallion.

Felygn gave me this for you. He opened his hand. A rough green gem glowed within.

The moment he saw it, the otherworlder recognized the power it contained. This wasn't a skill gem, it was far more valuable.

A Moonstone, he whispered.

He's always been sentimental. Take it.

Dallion did.

Come back when you have decided.

Before Dallion could respond, the purple light surrounding him disappeared, replaced by darkness. The force of gravity violently pulled him down. It was only his quick reaction that allowed him to cast a flight spell. There was no trace of the timepiece, Vihrogon, Harp, Adzorg, or anything else, for that matter. For all intents and purposes, Dallion was hovering right above a massive hole that bore down to the depths of the world.

Being already destroyed during its gleam, the double vortex had only lasted a fraction of a second, but that had proved enough to cause the devastation.

Pool souls, Dallion thought.

They, like him, had assumed it would be weeks before the event occurred. How could one be so wrong? The vortexes weren't a natural event. They weren't caused by the void or some magic entity trying to enter the world's reality. Adzorg's timepiece had triggered them all of them. This had been ground zero of the greatest threat, but it wasn't all. The fragments that had flown off into the distance, they had and would cause dozens of other vortexes to emerge, along with everything that included. The entire field of tower vortexes that the archmage had sent Dallion and Katka to investigate, the gleams that had been appearing for weeks or more, all had been caused by this one fight right now.

I'm starting to hate magic, Dallion said. Is everyone alright?

A chorus of answers came from his realm, indicating that other than a brief period of being smothered by void no more than a few years everything was fine. Some, like Lux, were pleased to be able to talk with Dallion again, others, like Nox, remained mostly indifferent. At the end of the day, things were more or less back to normal with one notable exception.

Vermillion, Dallion thought, returning the purple Moonstone to his realm. Once it was gone, he looked at the one still in his hand.

Two Moonstones green and purple. They were beyond powerful, granting the strength of a deity even if for a limited amount of time. And yet, he remained uncertain what to do with them.

Using his Vermillion ring, the otherworlder placed the second stone in his awakening realm as well.

Not the ideal way to deal with the situation, Adzorg said, slowly descending from above. The mage seemed in rather good shape, considering what had happened. The vast majority of his magic devices were gone or destroyed, and yet there was an unfamiliar calm emanating from him.

Im surprised you didnt run, Dallion said.

I made a vow, didnt I? The old man smiled, amused. Besides, whats the point? Ive finally finished what I started. The Order can have me now.

What about the emperor? Dallion wanted to ask. It was nave to think that the ruler would protect Adzorg. It didnt matter that he had been the one who ordered him to destroy the device, or even create it. Nobles had their own way of viewing the world, just as mages.

Are we heading home, dear boy? the old mage asked.

Soon. Lets see what could be done to help, first.

With the immediate sense of urgency gone, there was a bit of time to focus on the survivors. Provided the size of the vortexes, a lot had been consumed, but even ten percent of a dwarven capital was a lot.

Using what skills he had, Dallion did his best to find and heal the survivors and also repair any items or guardians that had withstood the recent catastrophe. It was a slow process, even with mass spells and assistance from Adzorg, but even so, he found that there were a lot fewer people than he hoped there would be.

The palace, and most of the influential sectors, had been completely destroyed. The guard officers had suddenly found themselves the highest-ranking people, forced to deal with a situation they had not once in their life expected to find themselves in. It didnt help that the temples of the Order had also been devastated, even those that hadnt been in the vortexes' path.

On the second day after the incident, external assistance arrived. However, it wasnt the type that anyone imagined it would be.

Crimson clouds, Dallion said, looking at the horizon. Adzorg had mentioned spotting them a few hours ago, but the otherworlder had believed those to be forces heading to the future cortex fields. Clearly, they werent. Didnt think the Academy would send anyone here.

They arent. Those belong to the imperial legions.

Dallion concentrated, trying to spot proof of the old mans words.

I dont see anything.

Its not about seeing, its about knowing. Even Alien wouldnt be foolish enough to cluster a group of cloud forts so close together. Its one thing having a show of force where its safe. Out here, that would be too risky.

Are you saying that the emperor is a worse tactician than Alien?

No. The emperor is powerful enough not to care about losing them.

He wants you that badly, eh?

I would like to think so, but in this case, I doubt they are coming for me. No joy emanated from Adzorg. Look at the rest of the sky. Not a cloud in sight. That's no chance or mere accident. Hundreds of furies must have painstakingly roamed the sky, making sure that it was flawless.

Why the hell would they do that?

They're here for you, dear boy. Did you think that your achievement would pass unnoticed?

Ten crimson cloud forts made their way to the capital's ruins. The few surviving dwarf guard towers didn't even make an attempt to interfere.

Ruby, Dallion looked at his left shoulder. Behave till I know what's going on.

The shardfly flicked its wings once. Although the Diroh it was supposed to protect within the vortexes had turned out to be a copyette, it had done little to end the deep sense of disappointment emanating from it. In the creature's mind it had still failed Dallion, and was willing to compensate to gain his favor.

It's fine, little guy, Dallion said. Just remain calm.

One of the cloud forts broke off from the rest, approaching further. Dozens of furies were visible on it, all of them with crimson red hair and imperial uniforms. One, wearing a breastplate of red crystal, flew off, elegantly descending to the ground a dozen steps from the otherworlder.

Dallion Darude, the fury said in a loud voice. You're hereby summoned to the Imperial Palace. We are to escort you and your prisoner in the name of Emperor Tamin.

So, Adzorg was right. Interesting how the old man had predicted it, especially since there was so little to go by.

How did you know? Dallion asked over his shoulder.

Simple. The emperor told me. The former archmage said. I told you that nobles place echoes in the realms of their subjects. Why would you think I was any different?

Normally, the question would sound a lot more critical, as if it were Dallion's fault for not figuring it out. This time, the only emotions coming from Adzorg were obedience and a sense of futility. There was no denying the emperor's will, and at present Dallion had to agree.

Without a word, both mages cast their flight spells, floating up to the cloud bastion. A path of sea iron was expecting them there, leading inside. Close to a hundred furies stood silently, looking at them with emotionless expressions.

Send someone to inform the archmage, Dallion said as the armor-clad fury landed in front of them, leading the way in.

Do not concern yourself with that, he said in a polite fashion. It will be taken care of.

That didn't bode well.

Can I know why I have been summoned? The otherworlder asked. If common logic was to be used, it was for him to be rewarded for a job well done. However, since nobles were involved, he put his chances at fifty-fifty. The last time he had done a noble a favor by saving her city, she had resented him for it.

That is for the emperor to say. All I know is that Ive been ordered to lead you to his private garden. Anything else youll have to find out for yourself.

Chapter 795: The Emperor's Summons

This way, battle apprentice, the lead fury said, inviting Dallion further inside of the cloud ford.

As they walked, the walls of the structure constantly shifted, forming large windows before closing again. It was a nice touch, making Dallion almost feel like nobility. One might say that he had earned it with his current level boost, not to mention fulfilling his goal. And yet, something felt off. Back on Earth, he would have called it imposter syndrome. In the awakened world, it was more like joining a game without knowing all the rules. There was a reason that a person had to go through a gate before moving to the next stage. Those who chose to go through with it knew exactly what they were getting themselves into; those that didnt were aware of their limits. By delaying his answer, Dallion had placed himself in-between.

The room the fury took them to was relatively large and meticulously decorated with fine furniture, paintings, and even statues. A whole section of the wall had opened up, providing a panoramic view outside.

Dallion could see the air currents shielding the opening, just as he could see the thousands of small strands circulating around Adzorg. While they didnt restrict his movement, everyone knew they acted like a mobile prison very much like Marchs armor.

Theres no need to be concerned, everything is covered with sea iron powder, the fury said. Youll be able to relax until we reach the Imperial Palace.

I know. Thanks, Dallion said, taking a seat near the wide window. How long till then?

Not long, battle apprentice.

Without further explanations the fury left the room, the entrance disappearing behind him. Despite being treated as nobility, the furies had no intention of leaving him to do whatever he pleased. Thanks to his forging skills, Dallion was able to see the thin layer of sea iron covering walls, floor, and ceiling.

Locked in a cage of splendor, he said.

Those are the best cages to be in. Adzorg joined him, taking a nearby seat. Not to worry, dear boy. The trip wont be long.

It took days for them to get here.

True, but only because they were searching for you.

How hard could it be? Dallion wondered. There had been a massive vortex tower three even. And while one could argue that the last two had only been present for a moment, the initial one had lasted for quite a while longer. Surely one of the cloud forts or the legion commanders should have noticed.

Outside, the remaining cloud forts slowly moved away, opening a path as it were. The precision with which they did that was immaculate, even though there was no reason for it. The only conclusion Dallion could come by was that the emperor had ordered it himself.

Suddenly, the cloud fort shot forward. There was no sense of acceleration or tremors, but looking outside, one could see the terrain shoot by. The last time Dallion had felt anything of the sort was when Jiroh had used her air currents to pull him along. It was the fastest mode of travel he had experienced at least until now.

Magic, he whispered.

A blend of magic, Adzorg corrected. Air currents propel us through the portals. Exceedingly inefficient. Most of the furies onboard will be exhausted for weeks after this, but

The emperor gets what he wants, Dallion finished the sentence.

A journey of weeks passed in mere minutes. Soon enough, Dallion was able to recognize the territory of the empire. His magic vision let him see the thin membrane that enveloped the edge of the land. It was too thin to separate it from the wilderness, rather it had scooped part of it along with everything it contained one large external sign indicating whose territory this belonged to. Merging with it, and at the same time separating, were several more thin layers possibly county or provincial borders. With the speed at which the cloud fort changed location, it was difficult to tell for certain, but they were there. Towns and villages came in and out of view, like large marbles; then, finally, the imperial capital emerged.

Dallion swallowed. For the longest time, he had imagined it to be similar to a province, just named differently. One couldn't be more wrong. Despite its massive territory, this wasn't a collection of settlements, but one enormous city itself.

One big city, Dallion said, turning to the old mage. When you said that the Academy is within the city, that's what you meant.

It's never been a secret, but people don't believe it until they see it with their own eyes.

I can see why, Dallion thought.

That's not the best part, though. The Imperial Palace is different.

The further the cloud fort ventured in the imperial capital, the slower it became. Soon, the magic jumps ended, leaving it to be propelled only by the furies' natural magic.

Exhaustion emanated from everywhere, progressively increasing as time went by. If magic only exhausted stamina, the furies must have cast an unimaginable number of spells to be rendered to such a state.

There, Adzorg stood up. The gates.

As much as Dallion looked, he wasn't able to see anything. Both his magic and perception traits were higher than the old man's which made it all the more unusual.

I don't see anything special, he said after a while.

You will. The area guardians must get to know you before they show themselves to you.

An illusion?

Maybe. I certainly wasn't able to see through it. It's said that the first emperor taught them how to hide the early capital in plain sight. Of course, back then, the capital was smaller than the Imperial Palace.

Fields and forests stretched as far as the eye could see. And yet, Dallion wasn't able to hear a single voice coming from them.

Can you hear me? he asked, using his herbology skill.

For the first time since he could remember, the plants didn't talk back.

The cloud fort started a slow descent, moving closer and closer to the ground. Then, without warning, the palace appeared.

Calling it a palace was like calling the ocean a puddle. It was larger than anything Dallion had seen, larger than anything he could imagine. A cluster of buildings, statues, and bridges connecting to one another continued as far as the eye could see. For all intents and purposes, one could say that this was one giant building spreading in every direction. Even the lakes and forests scattered throughout it were densely populated in a very organized fashion.

Most amazing of all, the whole place didn't seem at all cluttered. The best way Dallion could describe it was like a giant custom-made library that contained millions of books, yet every book was in its place and not interfering with any other.

People, predominantly awakened, moved about on wide streets on foot or on impressive horseless carriages made of sky silver. Ten-foot statues of stone and sun gold stood motionless, only their eyes glowing a deep purple. Based on the intensity of magic threads within them, they seemed stronger than the magic golems at the Academy.

No one from the ground paid any attention to the cloud fort as it flew to one of the towering buildings within the capital. In normal cities, that would be referred to as the actual palace. Rising hundreds of feet above the lower levels, it was like a mountain with a settlement of its own. Dallion had a pretty good idea of what Lanitol had tried to copy, but compared to it, the provincial capital was like a child's sketch.

The emperor's home, Adzorg said, seeing what the otherworlder was looking at. Only the imperial family and its guests live there.

It's divided in sections, Dallion noted.

The sky silver section is where the branch family lives. There are a few of them, so be careful how you address them. House Elazni is the most notable. They are the descendants of the first emperor's offspring that didn't take the throne. Their domain is close to a fifth of the palace area. The Mizovy came from a concubine of the third emperor. It's best if you don't mention that. They get very touchy on the subject. They occupy the small sliver to the west of the area.

Only two?

Those are the important ones. The rest are nobles that married into the imperial family. While the imperials are alive, they share the benefits of being semi-imperial. After that, they'll return to being the common noble houses they were before.

I still think there would have been more.

Apparently, most of the emperors decided that one child is enough. It's been good for stability, although each time there's a new emperor, there's always someone willing to take the chance and stage a war or coup attempt.

I guess they decided to go early on this one, Dallion thought.

Making its way to the golden section of the domain, the fort landed on one of the many towers. The moment they did, a cadre of golden armored troops emerged from within, forming two columns.

Seeing them, Dallion twitched. Those weren't golems or people in expensive armor; they were metalins.

It's alright, Harp said from within Dallion's realm. Just remain calm.

Easier said than done, he thought.

I won't let anything bad happen to you, the harp's word ensured him.

The air currents protecting the window disappeared. Moments later, so did the ones around Adzorg. The opening widened until the entire wall was gone.

What now? Dallion looked at the mage.

A stairway of clouds formed, leading to the top of the tower in response. And just in case there was any uncertainty, the furniture in the room sank down into the floor. From here on, there was only one possible course of action.

Experience told Dallion to cast a flight spell. The little he knew about noble etiquette cautioned him against it. Nobles didn't like spells to be cast without their say so, and right now Dallion was in the domain of the greatest noble of them all.

Reciting the names of the Moons, he took a deep breath and walked down the stairway. Steps dissolved behind him as he left them. The moment he set foot on the tower floor, the entire cloud fort floated back up, moving away. A boy of about twelve appeared, walking up the flight of stairs leading into the tower. At first, Dallion thought him to be a page, but that was before his eyes adjusted to the bright light reflecting off the golden surface. It wasn't a noble that had come to greet him, but an overseer.

Battle apprentice Darude, the boy said with a slight bow. I greet you on behalf of his excellency and welcome you to the Imperial Palace.

I am honored, Dallion said, only to hear a polite cough from Adzorg a few steps behind.

The overseer looked at the otherworlder as if he were made out of air.

This way, he said, turning around.

Harp, what did I mess up? Dallion asked as he followed the boy.

You only talk to the emperor when he asks a question, the guardian replied.

He welcomed me.

Yes, but that wasnt a question.

The staircase led to a large floor filled with metalins and servants. Looking at them, Dallion couldnt tell which made him feel more uncomfortable: the metalins or the people. Every single one of them was an awakened between level forty and fifty, and based on the emotions emanating from them not at all happy to have him there.

The trio made their way to a crystal elevator and took it down.

The emperor will have an audience with you in his garden, the overseer said. Do not disagree with him, do not talk unless addressed, and remain no less than five feet from him at all times. Understood?

Yes, overseer, Dallion said, maintaining a bland expression.

Its all for your protection, not his, the boy clarified. The tone he did it in suggested that there had been mishaps in the past. Also, dont look him in the face. Since youre a full mage, it will hurt.

Chapter 796: Presence of a Ruler

A pair of sun gold metalins opened the massive door leading to the imperial gardens. The entire arch was adorned with finely crafted sculptures depicting a hunting scene. From what one could tell, the emperor recognizable by his tall frame and massive crown was hunting boars while riding a dragon. Any attempt at morality was long gone, but even so it instilled a sense of awe in anyone who looked.

Oh boy. Dallion swallowed.

The last time he felt this nervous was the first time he did a school play with his parents in the audience. At the time, he had honestly believed that failing would be the end of the world. Of course back then, he had been nothing but a child. Now, as a grownup, the sensation was many times worse.

Dont offer any pretext to extend your visit, the child overseer said.

Is that for my own good again? Dallion asked, preparing himself mentally.

The emperors meeting foreign emissaries, the other said sharply. Go ahead.

Passing through the door almost felt like passing through an awakening gate. Although Dallion could see part of the garden clearly, crossing the threshold made it explode in size, causing everything else to disappear. If he didnt know better, he could almost imagine himself being teleported to an entirely different location. Looking closely, though, he was able to see the faint magic patterns creating the illusion of infinity.

A pair of moon platinum bladerers descended from the sky, landing on both sides of the door. Cold and emotionless, they made it clear that Dallion wouldnt be able to leave unless allowed.

Thanks for the tip, he thought. I already know that.

Still, it was a good idea to keep on walking and not have the emperor wait.

A new visitor, plants whispered and moved as he passed by.

Will there be fun? A rose bush moved in closer, its thorns glistening.

No, its someone he likes

, a single lily replied from a pond on the other side of the path.

Later, then. Disappointment emanated from the roses as the bush pulled back.

The garden seems to like you, a deep voice said from further in. The high hedges prevented Dallion from seeing its owner, but he didnt have to guess who that might be. Its rare that they get an empath.

On cue, the entire garden shifted. Grass, bushes, and flowers moved to the side, extending the path Dallion was walking on. Looking at it, one would say that the arrangement had always been like that. The cobbled path continued all the way to an aether-stone gazebo. A single figure was there, tending to a large multicolored bush. Looking closer, Dallion saw him separating and merging flowers of different colors, as if he were weaving.

Flower weaving, the imposing figure said without even turning around. A legacy taught to me by my father. There was a time when he used it to create soldiers out of the land itself, but that was back when we didnt have sophisticated tools of war. Now, this is more a hobby than anything else.

Reaching ten feet from the emperor, Dallion stopped. Light bounced off the rulers clothes, causing his outfit to constantly change color as if it were made out of chameleon skin. Even so, the skin of the man himself was shining in a bright purple, causing tears to form in the corners of Dallions eyes.

Dont look at him. He remembered what the overseer had said. Good advice.

Finishing his living tapestry, the emperor turned around.

So, you are the famed otherworlder, he said. As he did, a throne of wood grew out of the ground, letting him sit. Moments later, it was followed by a small three-legged stool that appeared in front of Dallion. Alien has been telling me a lot about you. He usually has a high opinion of everyone that joins his circle, but I see he wasnt wrong about you.

Alien saying something good about Dallion? That had to be a first.

You finally managed to find my former archmage and destroy his gremlin device. The emperor leaned back. Now the archbishop can finally stop annoying me with that. Given that he caused the mess to begin with, hes the last person who should be complaining.

Clearly, there was no love shared between the emperor and the Order of the Seven Moons. Dallion wasnt certain about the precise power-balance between the two, but at the very least he could see why Adzorg had been so confident that no force could defeat the emperor. Unlike most mages and high nobles, the man hadnt bothered hiding his info rectangle, leaving it proudly on display. All seven traits on it were above a hundred and twenty.

Youre surprised? the emperor asked, aware of Dallions astonishment.

I didnt expect you to be an empath, Emperor, Dallion replied.

Oh, that. The emperor waved a hand in utter disinterest. I guess dear Felygn doesnt think of me as his own. I was Galateas favored first, although hes been quiet lately as well. What can you do? the man shrugged. Moons will be Moons. But enough about them. Now is a time to congratulate you.

Congratulate me, sire? Dallion asked before he could stop himself. From an etiquette point of view, this was a big no-no. Fortunately, no displeasure emanated from the emperor.

Apart from dealing with a minor annoyance for me, you also rose to the rank of a mage overnight. Quite a neat trick, I must say.

Dallion remained silent.

Oh, dont be bashful. Im sure my old friend has filled your head with talk of Academy committees, master trials, and all that nonsense. Two things make a mage. The emperor pointed up with his index finger. A magic trait above eighty, and he pointed at himself me, he added with an elegant laugh. If I say youre a mage, then youre a mage.

Three more bladerers flew down from above, landing around Dallion. One of them unfolded a robe made entirely of magic thread and presented it to the otherworlder. It was quite impressive, although not as much as the one hed obtained from Archduke Lanitols mage. Furthermore, Dallion couldnt feel the presence of a guardian within his new gift.

Your thoughts? The emperor asked, amused.

I am deeply honored and in awe, Emperor. Dallion instantly bowed, accepting his prize. He knew better than to say anything different.

Of course you are. Youre allowed to put it on once you leave the garden. A brief flick of his hand and the bladerers flew off just as quickly as they had appeared. Now, there are a few more matters we need to discuss. Youre aware of my conflict with the Azures?

Conflict? Given everything that had occurred in the last year, that was hardly the appropriate word. At least it was better than disagreement.

Yes, Emperor.

Despite the assurances of Alien and my archdukes, things arent proceeding as quickly as Id like. What should have been over months ago has stalled, making it obvious that I need to take matters into my own hands. And so, I intend to do just that by sending you.

Part of Dallions mind was unsurprised by the comment. It was natural for high nobles to have others deal with their problems. At the same time, being asked by the emperor filled him with enthusiasm. Right now, he felt special; no, he felt chosen for a task in which so many others had failed.

It doesnt need to be flashy if you cant help it, just dont let me down.

Yes, Emperor.

Good. And once youre done, Ill acknowledge you as a noble.

Dallion suddenly froze. It was too early for the emperor to know that. Only the inhabitants of his personal realm knew that he had reached level eighty and not even they were aware he was considering accepting.

Surprised again? There was a note of boredom in the emperors voice, as if Dallions novelty had worn off.

I am not a noble, sire.

Bring me victory and you will be.

In his mind, Dallion let out a sigh of relief.

Yes, Emperor. He bowed again.

Of course you will. Youre an otherworlder, after all. Did Adzorg tell you that the capital used to be full of otherworlders at one point?

He might have mentioned it a few times, sire.

Ah, those were different times. People from different worlds, with knowledge far exceeding this world. Adzorg himself used to train a group of otherworldly mages back then. He was rather fond of them, but alas, they were easily corrupted by the Star. To be honest, at one point I was afraid that you might share their antics. Of course, given your dealings with the Order, thats clearly not the case.

Dallion swallowed. He felt the atmosphere change. This was no longer an amicable monologue on the rulers part.

What exactly did they ask of you?

They wanted me to capture Adzorg. Dallion felt he was unable to keep himself from answering. Before it was too late.

I see

Which is why I was hoping you would grant me his life, sire, Dallion quickly added.

Oh?

With the device gone, he is no threat to the empire, and

He was your mentor. The emperor finished the sentence for him. Quite an interesting request. When Alien and other otherworlders gained my favor, they always requested one of two things: power or a way to get back to their world. Youve chosen neither?

Having Adzorg belonging to me as an advisor is the equivalent of power, Emperor. At least to me.

Clich. The emperor yawned. Still, it will give me an opportunity to annoy the archbishop. Ive decided to grant your request, as long as you bring me victory. Understood?

Yes, Emperor.

The answer must have been found pleasing, for the emperor waved his hand, dismissing Dallion. As a reminder, the stool beneath the otherworlder quickly shrank, disappearing into the ground.

With a low bow, Dallion was just about to start walking backwards towards the entrance, when the path did it for him. He could feel the guardian of the area pulling him back, as the bushes and hedges were rearranged again, blocking the ruler from view. In a matter of seconds, Dallion found himself once more at the gate. This time, the bladerers were no longer blocking it.

Wow, Dallion thought.

Considering how brief their conversation had been, he couldn't have been here more than a few minutes. In his mind, though, the experience had lasted for hours far longer than he deserved it to be.

He had seen nobles, clerics, mages, even the Moons, and none of them were as alluring as the emperor. If there was the worldly equivalent of superstardom and imposing majesty all in one, that was him. Emperor Tamin didn't need to threaten or resort to a display of power. His mere presence was enough to make people aware of his might. If he decided to set foot on the battlefield, the war would be won there and then yet such trivial activities were beneath him. He had given his subjects the opportunity to shine.

The doors opened. Dallion expected to see Adzorg and the overseer waiting for him, but they were gone. In their place, he saw a figure dressed in expensive silks and a full set of sea iron armor.

In the back of his mind, he remembered the overseer saying something about foreign emissaries coming for an audience. It was that notion that nudged him to step forward, returning back to the inside of the building.

No sooner had he done so, when a notion of normalcy surrounded him, as if he were gently returning from a high.

What the hell did I just go through? Dallion glanced over his shoulder. It didn't feel like magic maybe the plants in the garden had made him more impressionable than he was supposed to be?

Seeing his bewildered state, the armored emissary went up to Dallion and stopped, the full helmet turning in his direction.

My apologies. Dallion stepped to the side, still struggling with the aftereffects of euphoria.

I never doubted you'd make it far, a familiar voice said. Moments later, the emissary took off her helmet.

Eury? Dallion managed to say.

Chapter 797: The Step to Nobility

It was the last person Dallion expected to see, especially here. Adzorg while posing as Nil had told him that the gorgon had joined the Alliance of Stone and Steel, though never explicitly in what capacity.

One look was enough to see she had become a full noble, still leading him by a few levels. Her empathy trait had increased by a fair amount, reaching the mid-twenties. Yet, more important than all, since Dallion had gotten rid of the void within him, the sensation of being close to her had returned. No longer the dull inertia he had felt on and off during his time at the Academy, his feelings for her had rekindled, which sadly was the worst possible time.

You're a n he began, only to be stopped by her finger on his lips.

I don't have much time, she whispered in the language of griffins, of all things. Her snakes moved about casually, glancing in all directions. You're in danger. The archmage is planning to kill you.

The sudden change of topic caused a flurry of mixed feelings within Dallion. There were times when he would have considered that statement a given just not now. Despite their mutual hatred, Alien and Dallion needed each other. Not only that, they had all but made Moon vows not to kill each other. It was Dallion who had earned the man his current title, and in return received a special one of his own.

He can't, Dallion whispered back in the same animal language. He needs me too much.

No, he doesn't. Trust me, I know. I can't tell you how, but I know. He

The emperor is waiting, emissary, the child overseer said, appearing out of nowhere. Your reunion can wait for later.

If there was any emotion within the entity, it had been buried too deep for Dallion to sense. Even the expected ripples of annoyance were no longer present. It was as if a chunk of ice had materialized in the room a few feet away.

I'm aware. The snakes on the gorgons head straightened out in a clear display of hostility. But that's for him to say, not you.

The authority in her voice was strong enough that even Dallion felt like taking a step back.

It was nice seeing you again, Dal, she added, no smile on her face. We'll continue this at a later time. And with that she stepped forward, the metalins opening the door for her.

You had to expect that, Gen said, within Dallion's domain. Knowing her, there's no way she could have remained a hunter.

Yeah, no way Dallion replied.

Where is Adzorg? he asked, turning to the overseer in an attempt to mimic the gorgons attitude.

The prisoner has been taken to the imperial healer, the other didn't appear at all impressed. You'll get him back once the emperor decrees. There was a brief pause. Along with all his missing body parts.

There was that. Magic could only mimic that much.

Very well. I'll be Dallion's voice trailed off. A new crystal elevator had appeared on the floor. Its occupant was someone Dallion expected to meet here as much as he expected to see the gorgon. Alien, he said to himself.

Any other day, Dallion would view this as a coincidence. It was well known that Alien went to report to the emperor on a frequent basis. Having him spontaneously arrive just now, of all times,

suggested there was more to it, especially after Eurys warning which happened to be an actual coincidence.

Archmage, Dallion said respectfully with a slight bow as the other stepped out of the elevator.

We need to talk. Alien went straight to the point. We'll need a room. He glared at the overseer.

Yes, archmage. The platinum blond child all but sighed. Still, he gestured to a segment of the wall behind him. A doorway formed within, leading further in.

Without a word of appreciation, Alien walked straight in. Dallion followed, ending up in a small six-by-six-foot room. Comfortable, it was not, although it was safe to say that no one would be able to listen in. Just to make certain, the archmage cast a spell covering the entire space with an aether barrier.

Fly up, he said in a harsh tone as he levitated off the ground.

So much for congratulating me on becoming a mage, Dallion thought and cast the spell.

Only three of us are left now, Alien said.

Katka's dead?

No, but she might well be. The idiot took everything we had and set off to attack the Azure battlemage in full force, never considering that she must stumble on more than one of them.

Given the strength of a battle mage, one could only imagine the devastation several could make.

Thomas is also gone and Leora went back to hiding in the west as she always does. The old man grit his teeth as he spoke.

From what Dallion could assume, Thomas had to be the water construct and Leora, the cloud woman. That must have been what the emperor meant when he said that Alien had overestimated the situation. By all accounts, the Academy held an advantage when it came to mages. Along with the cloud forts, it was expected that they would achieve victory even if at a high cost. Clearly, that hadn't occurred.

What about Grym? Dallion asked.

Conflicting reports, the other said as if that was besides the point. Some say he's leading the Azure armies, others that he's sitting on the throne of the newly established sea capital. Everything's gone to shit! And it's all because of you!

Me? What the heck? I captured Adzorg and

If you hadn't joined the Academy, we never would have split! The battle mages had been grumbling for decades, but without you they'd never have done anything more! In any event, not now!

The archmage continued venting for several minutes, assigning blame to Dallion for everything beneath the sun. In some instances, it was difficult to deny the ex-hunters involvement, but in most of the examples, the links were barely tangible at best. Humming a tune to calm himself internally, Dallion listened on, forcing himself to remain as quick and understanding as humanly possible.

The display utterly changed his perception of the archmage. Up till now, he'd seen him as a capable strategist, weaving plots through the empire and beyond. Now, the last thing he looked like was someone who was in control. Rather, he appeared as someone who was losing it.

What do you want me to do? Dallion asked after the stream of Aliens tirades finally ended.

Keep us alive, the other replied, fear emanating from him. In case you haven't guessed, the emperor has put our heads on the chopping block. He wants a victory and if he doesn't get one, he'll get personally involved. Heavy silence filled the room. And if he gets involved, it wouldn't matter on whose side we are. Everyone will be annihilated.

Come on. You can't think that

That an all-powerful noble will throw his entire toy set in the fire because one piece got scratched while playing? You think that because you've spent a few minutes with him, you've gotten to understand him? I know him better than you think. This nice chat he had with you was a warning you completely misinterpreted. Just because he's polite doesn't mean he's forgiving. One more mess up and you won't have to worry about the Academy there will be no Academy!

There it was: terror mixed with hatred the terror of someone who had failed and knew it. It didn't matter what punishment would follow, it was possible all the emperor did was retire Alien and have another take his place, just as he had done in the past. In the otherworlder's mind, though, a completely different reality had taken hold. After everything he'd done - the plots, the betrayals, the backstabbing needed to get to where he was, he feared that he'd be subject to the same treatment should he lose control and the worse things got at the front, the more he was losing the meager power he had. Right now, Dallion appeared to be his only hope, and also the person he feared the most the one he would betray, given the opportunity, if only to prolong his illusion of control.

Alright, Dallion nodded. When do I set off?

A cloud fort is waiting at the top of the tower. Alien had somewhat regained his composure. Put on your new robe and wait for me there. We'll be heading to the front.

I'll need my apprentice with me.

The fury? Alien arched a brow. Why? She's useless.

She won't be once tower vortexes start shooting up from the ground, Dallion used his music skill to subtly nudge the archmage. The man was already terrified of losing, so a gentle suggestion was all it took for him to see there'd be more power in numbers.

I'll see to it. Alien cast a triple circle spell. The magic barrier surrounding them faded away.

With the disposition of a storm cloud, the archmage left the room, leaving Dallion alone. While the shameful display had shown him to be a lot less invincible than he presented himself, Dallion knew that in a one-to-one fight, the other would likely win. In addition to having decades to hone his magic skills, Alien also had all the spells and magic devices of the Academy at his disposal. Even now, he probably had dozens hidden on him, providing him with all sorts of advantages. The only way to win was to change the battlefield, which meant that he could no longer delay making a choice.

It always comes to this, doesn't it? Dallion sighed.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Reality shifted, yet the new one wasn't of Dallion's personal realm. Rather, he found himself in the courtyard of an orange castle. A single fury with orange hair was there, sitting on a stone bench, looking at the setting sun on the horizon.

Dararr? Dallion asked. I thought that

That it'll be Astreza? The Orange Moon looked at him. No, it was always me. He just indulged himself, as always, wanting to have a chat with you. Can't say I blame him. You're one of the interesting ones, and a human, to boot.

Is that significant? Dallion wondered, though chose not to voice his question. For once, the deity didn't react to his thoughts with anything else but a smile.

So, you've made your decision?

The world made it for me, Dallion replied.

Really? The fury tilted her head.

There was a long moment of silence. While there were factors that had hastened his actions, Dallion had always known exactly how he wanted to proceed. The only reason he didn't want to go so fast was because it would make him a target sooner than he'd like. Being thrust into a polite society of backstabbing politics was going to be a lot easier if he didn't have to worry about nobles and other awakened charging at him on the field of battle.

Is there a way I could hide passing through the gate? he asked. Just for a while.

Still demanding conditions. Astreza was sulking for weeks after you turned down the offer.

Weeks? I didn't turn down

Of course you did, the Moon interrupted. You never had any real intention of stopping at level eighty. Even with the curveball you received from Aether, you were on the course to join the nobility. You could have said that there and then, but you postponed the grand moment, and just after you've purified the void. A few of us were worried you might fall and become the next Star.

Upon hearing that, Dallion tensed up.

Or Adzorg, the Moon continued. Both of you fulfilled the requirements. It was fun watching you push each other away from the path you were both heading towards.

Adzorg could have become the Star? Having an archmage obtain the power of the void was extremely troubling, especially since he still had the knowledge to make a device capable of bringing forth the end of the world. And yet, the way the Moon spoke of it was as if it were nothing more than a game.

So, you're really ready this time? She stood up, floating up to him. No indecisions, second thoughts, and all that.

I've got many, but yes, I'm ready.

You're sure? The orange fury narrowed her eyes. Once you pass through, nothing will be the same.

I've heard that before. Dallion forced a smile.

Maybe, but each gate changes things more than the last. Up to now, we've been holding you by the hand as a child. After this, you'll be treated as an adult.

I thought I was that now.

We know, The Moon chuckled. Everyone reaching this point thinks they have it all figured out, just like teenagers given a brief taste of freedom. I won't lie. Some regretted taking the final step.

Dallion glanced at the door. As the saying went, one could never un-lose one's innocence. However, refusing to go forward means spending the rest of his life going back.

I'm sure, he said, then pushed the massive door of the castle open.

Chapter 798: Domain Rulers

The space Dallion went into was a hall. The entire floor was covered with miniature structures, as if he had suddenly found himself in Legoland. The difference was that the structures were realistic, representing villages, towns and cities. People the size of Dallion, whose features were unrecognizable, moved about, placing or removing structures to various settlements. One could almost think they were playing a game, although based on the harsh atmosphere, Dallion got the impression it was a lot more bloodthirsty than anything he had experienced so far.

Welcome to the game of domain rulers, Dararr said, stepping in after him. In the real world, they're referred to as nobles, although the term has lost its meaning with all the familial ties and honorary titles.

Dallion watched two figures place structures within their respective settlements in a wild race. As they did, the domain around each settlement grew.

From here on, you've been given the ability to create your own domains. A house, a village, possibly even a town. Whatever you create will have its own domain, protecting it from the wilderness.

The otherworlder felt his mouth go dry. It was well known that nobles controlled settlements. Dallion had witnessed it himself many times. On one occasion, he had even briefly become the owner of Nerosal by defeating its guardian. He had read in the tomes of his ring library that mighty awakened had the power to create settlements, though he had believed it to be through the defeat of area guardians. Anyone could build a house out in the open. From there, it was a simple case of defeating the guardian enough times until it grew to the point of a mansion, a castle, or an entire village. Clearly, he had been mistaken. Nobles had the ability to create the area itself out of nothing, birthing the first guardian that came with it and not only one.

I can create area guardians?

No, the Moon said. You can now create key guardians—the ones that determine a settlement domain. A house in the wilderness is no different than a forgotten item. Sure, with enough effort and dedication you can maintain it, even chase off the beasts that attack, but you'll never create a settlement.

As she spoke, the domain of one of the figures doubled in size. As it did, the white rectangle depicting the figures awakened level increased by one.

From here on, its no longer enough to fix your inner faults in order to advance. Reaching this point means youve obtained everything it takes. The Moon went to his other side. We no longer need to keep an eye on you, not anymore. In our eyes youve become an adult and as an adult you are free to do whatever you wish: succeed or fail, its all based on your effort and your choices.

No way. Dallion looked at her in disbelief.

The last few years, the Moons had constantly reminded him how disappointed they were in one thing or another. Hed had his heart thorned, his leveling benefits cut off, and even his level capped although one could argue that was, in fact, the voids doing. And now they were telling him they no longer cared?

Youve advanced enough to make your own choices. We no longer intend to determine what those are.

But the rules? Dallion asked. What if I become the new Star? Or ally myself with him?

Havent empires in the past allied themselves with the Star?

What if I kill all the awakened in my settlement and enslave the rest?

Like Aspion did? The Moon smiled. Didnt you once wonder why nobles were allowed to place limiting echoes within the minds of non-awakened, while you yourself werent? Now you know the reason. Youre a domain ruler, which means that youre a Moon within your domain. You can be nice to your inhabitants or have them starve. Any benevolence or cruelty will bring their own outcomes one way or another. The entire blame of thanks will fall on you and you alone.

Now Dallion understood why in the world of nobles it was so important to save face. The protection, the abundance, the festivals, and the beauty displayed within cities had one sole goal: to maintain the happiness and loyalty of their inhabitants, and attract as many people as possible, awakened and non-awakened alike.

Looking throughout the hall, he was able to see higher level figures present gifts to the lower-standing ones. Funny, all this time, he thought it was the other way around.

So thats how I level up, he said, coming to the realization. By increasing my domain.

Yes. As your settlement increases in level, so do you. If you create a second one, its level is also added to yours.

What if I lose my settlement?

Your level remains the same, although you must create new settlements that reach its previous level before you can continue advancing.

So the strong remain strong.

And at the same time aware that they might never grow stronger, the Moon added. Its a complicated game in which war isnt always the best way to advance, even if it often appears to be.

The conflict between Countess Priscord and Archduke Lanitol.

A good example, yes. One that had been in the works for decades. Bit by bit she set up her domain, focusing on villages rather than big towns and cities. The archduke underestimated her, aware that

she couldn't win in a direct conflict until an opportunity presented itself. When that happened, it was already too late. The best he could hope for was a draw, which is what he managed to achieve.

A game that could last centuries. All the laws that forbade the leveling up of settlements had nothing to do with the poison plague. They were a desperate attempt to keep the countess from leveling up, and still she had found a way.

What happens if I'm defeated by another awakened? Dallion asked.

If you're killed? The Moon sounded surprised. You die.

I mean in an awakened realm.

There is no difference. You're a domain ruler now. As I said, we're no longer looking out for you. Traveling emblems no longer provide any benefit to you because you yourself are a walking domain. You can still create and bless them, as any initiate could, but they won't save you if you're killed in the real world or not.

So this was the game now. There was no doubt about it, this changed everything. If Dallion could describe his life as awakened up to now as a series of personal trials to improve, from here on it had become a strategy empire building experience. Not only did he have to create and develop his domain to level up, but also protect himself from direct attacks; and as he well knew, any high-level initiate with enough experience was one attack away from ending him.

No doubt there was a lot that the Moon wasn't telling him, but likely he'd get the hang of it with experience.

Can I invade domains?

You mean capture settlements that don't belong to you? The Moon shook her head.

Yes, but how do they become mine? Must I defeat the key guardians? Or kill the domain rulers?

Whatever you choose? If you can convince them to vow loyalty to you, you gain everything they have achieved.

Dallion was about to ask how come there were any who hadn't given a vow of fealty, when the answer popped into his mind. Making such a vow was the same as creating a self-imposed level cap. There would be no way for a lesser noble to challenge his superior, which in turn would kill all incentive on his part to advance. True, it provided stability, but killed off any potential gains for everyone involved. Or did it?

If I allow someone to create a domain within mine, does my level increase along with theirs?

You're learning, the fury said, then made her way to the center of the room. As she did, many of the figures and their domains melted away into fading dust particles. Your level depends on the level of your personal domains. However, the effect of the domains within is not as direct. If it were, no one would be able to catch up to the first domain rulers.

Isn't that the point?

The fury laughed.

While most restrictions in this world have been lifted, there are still a few answers you're not allowed to know. The point of it all is one of them. Or maybe there's no point to anything and we just like observing strife, growth, and conflict?

Sensing it was better to let the topic go, Dallion focused on the floor of the room.

The total number of subdomains within your own and their level determine your gains. Ten level one towns might increase your domain by ten, three cities might boost it with nine. It's all a numbers game from there on, one that you'll have to constantly keep track of.

Apparently, there was a level of symbiosis between domain rulers. Having towns and villages grow benefited the county, which in turn benefited the province, and ultimately the empire. Of course, that ran the risk of particularly ambitious nobles starting a civil war and turning the tables on their ruler. According to the historical scrolls, even archdukes had attempted to do the same to the emperor, only to be smacked down and possibly forced to vow their loyalty to him. It was interesting what happened with settlements that lost their domain ruler, though. At present, Veil Luor was in charge of Dallion's home village, and he was far from being a domain ruler. One could view him as a caretaker of the place. There was no doubt that the former countess Priscord had gained from the villages leveling, but without the risk of any revolts.

What if someone breaks a Moon vow? Dallion kept looking down. Will they still get punished?

Of course. All domains are within our domain, and while we grant a vast amount of freedom, going against us will not be ignored.

Just as the fallen south hadn't. Dallion could all but see it now: a domain ruler from Earth with delusions of grandeur and the power to back it up. The Star had probably thought that she had what it took to challenge the Moons, resulting in the catastrophe that followed.

What happens when I conquer the world? The otherworlder looked up.

Such a cliché question. The Moon sighed, clearly bored. Every awakened asks that upon passing through the gate. What happens when you claim it all? Do you gain control of the world? Do you become a Moon? The destruction of all? Or maybe something completely different follows. The answer to that question is always the same. The Moon floated over to Dallion, leaning in to whisper into his ear. If you're really curious, why not try to find out?

Dallion blinked.

That's it? He stared at her.

What did you expect? It's through your own efforts that you grow and learn. It's been like that until now. Why should it be different further on? You know several people have tried to take over the world, you're even friends with one of them. Have they given you an answer?

That was true. Pan had tried to take over the world at one point. Of course, that Star had been involved as was the case with every other attempt at world conquest. Asking him in the past had yielded no answers and given how the Orange Moon was daring Dallion, it probably wouldn't now, either.

Any other questions?

Dallion opened his mouth to ask.

Other than about the void and the eighth Moon, Dararr cut him short before he could voice a syllable.

Instantly, his mouth snapped shut. Aware that his time with the deity was all but up, the otherworlders mind desperately churned, trying to come up with a question that would be useful in the immediate future.

Can passing the gate be hidden?

I thought that after my explanation, that would have been made clear. One by one, the remaining figures in the room dissolved into clouds of sparkling particles. You're a newly established domain ruler. You grow your level by growing your domain.

But can others tell that I am?

If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one there, how can they tell it's fallen? The entire hall vanished.

Chapter 799: Recruiting a General

Sitting in a corner of the war room, Dallion read through the recent reports, while several of his instances observed the massive war map of the contested area. White-haired furies floated about, using air currents to move army pieces according to the latest developments in the actual war zone. The information was dutifully gathered by awakened spies or mages observing it in person and interpreted by people with their echoes within the room. Normally, Dallion would consider this a fully reliable method. After what had happened with Diroh and her echo, though, he was starting to have his doubts. Someone somehow had managed to snatch control of a foreign echo and make it say things that weren't true and not at all related to their original; and as the saying went, if it could be done once, it could be done several times more.

Show me all the gleams, Dallion ordered.

A crimson-haired fury nodded, then quickly cast a single-circle spell targeting the war map.

Clusters of purple emerged like pins on the whiteness of the map. There were many of them, far more than Dallion imagined. Initially he had thought there'd be a few dozen, fifty at most. Right now, he was looking at over a hundred. Each had a small counter above it, counting down the time remaining until they appeared for real.

The distribution of forces was very much in favor of the Tamin Empire almost too much so. If things were so rosy, the emperor wouldn't be in such need of a victory.

Losses? Dallion asked.

Ours or theirs? The fury looked at him. If there had been even the slightest fluctuation in her expression, one would have almost thought she'd made a joke. Sadly, she wasn't.

Ours.

Eleven thousand awakened, she replied without hesitation. Eight hundred and twenty-two mages, and fifty-seven cloud forts.

The numbers were massive by any stretch of the imagination. Eleven thousand wouldnt be much if they were talking about low-level soldiers. Dallion suspected that every single one of them was above level twenty, or even above forty. Even half that was enough to cause an entire province to surrender.

And theirs?

Uncertain. Probably less than a thousand.

In Dallions experience, when someone said less than things were really far from the number mentioned. And that wasnt even taking all the furies into account.

We really are in deep crap now, he thought. Whoever the military geniuses of the war were, they had made a deep mess of things and lost to far inferior numbers. Or maybe it wasnt as simple? It was doubtful that the emperor would tolerate incompetence, which meant that whoever the empire was facing had to be of vastly superior skill. As much as Dallion prided himself in being good in online games, hed never been part of a group larger than forty people. Leading thousands would require a bit more than what he currently had to offer in short, he would need a real general. Fortunately, he had two at hand.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The whiteness of the war room was quickly replaced by an almost supernatural scene. Having the sky reflect purple had been surreal enough. At present, the realm appeared to be split in two by an invisible line that passed through the heavens. On one side of the line the sky was the familiar purple, while the other was clear green.

Things have definitely changed, he said, looking up.

All three of Dallions echoes were at his arrival spot, ready to greet him. Gem and Lux were also present, perched on each of Julys shoulders. The youngest of the echoes didnt seem to mind he was the empath echo, after all.

Wheres Di? Dallion asked.

Dissolved, Ariel said. Said that since her original was on her way, there was no point in having an echo here. I think she didnt take the whole controlled thing lightly.

I could bet, Dallion thought, but only nodded.

Harp, Onda?

In their bay. Theyve been quiet since the latest change.

Right. That was an obvious hint on Harps part. She was nudging for Dallion to resolve things with Vihrogon, as if he needed further nudging. A lot of risks had been made in order to purify the shield guardian, making him stronger as a result. According to the Moons rules, though, they had also made it impossible for him to rebel. Ill go see shield.

Want me to take you there, boss? The firebird instantly flew from July onto Dallion, wrapping him in blue flames. Do you, do you?

Thanks Lux, but Ill be fine on my own. I need to have a chat with him alone like old times.

Lux let out a sad chirp.

His domain Gen began. Its different.

No surprises there. Hes a level three now.

No. The echo shook its head. Youll see when you get there. Just be prepared.

Presented with such a warning, Dallion expected to find a fortified wooden castle awaiting him in his realm. Instead, the structure the dryad used to inhabit had turned into a shack overgrown with vines and moss. Every single plant and piece of wood that composed it was of superior quality. Dallion could see the brightness of the magic threads that went through it like a well-organized net. The exterior form was chosen to deliberately appear run down.

Even without concentrating, Dallion could feel a bouquet of conflicting emotions emanating from inside. The same could be said for him as well. Dallion wanted to put the past in the past. Even the Nerosal overseer had acted aggressively against him when under the Stars influence. And yet, he couldnt deny how careless hed been, nor how much the betrayal hurt. Both Adzorg and Vihrogon had shaken his trust effectively for the same thing: but while the mage had sacrificed everything to destroy the device that would let the void into the world, Vihrogon had tried to activate it.

Sometimes we must face our decisions, Dallion thought, and entered.

The shack was even worse on the inside. Mold and fungus covered the walls and ceiling, while a reed-filled bog occupied three quarters of the floor.

Congratulations, lord baron, the dryad said, resting upon a chair half sunk into the bog. There was no sign of his weapons or marshal armor. The simple vest and britches made him look more like a ship-hand on a riverboat.

Why baron? Dallion asked.

Because thats the lowest noble rank there is, the guardian replied. The lowest real noble rank. There probably are a dozen more fake ones.

Dal would be fine.

Really? After all that happened? Im not so sure.

Roots emerged within the bog, forming tiles so that Dallion could continue forward. There was a slight moment of hesitation. A flight spell would make this a lot safer, but it would only prove the guardians point.

Trying to remain calm, Dallion continued forward without casting the spell. The roots creaked beneath him, but held his weight.

Cant be easy. Of the three beings you trusted the most, two have already betrayed you: the father figure and the cool uncle. Youre probably afraid that itll be Harps turn next.

Harp wont betray me.

Didnt you use to think the same about me? You went through so much to win my freedom from the general and link me to your realm, and what turned out? That there was a spy seed lying in wait.

There was no denying it. And at the same time, there had been some signs that he hadnt done it voluntarily. Dallion used to wonder why, at a certain point, the guardian had become silent and retracted. It was very much against his nature or function. Now, it made sense. He, like Dallion, was running away from a problem: the knowledge that he would be asked to turn him into a Star or kill him.

As he stood, Dallion noticed a single wooden bowl of crystal-clear water in the far corner of the shack. It seemed placed with care, though completely untouched.

Yes, shes been bringing it every day since my transformation, Vihrogon glanced at it. The only person in your realm that would come see me. Oh, everyones been very understanding, he added with a semi-smile. Some even share your hope that Im fully purified and reformed. Still, they arent dryads. To her, I remain a hero of the war.

Most probably, to the bowl guardian, he was.

How many more like you are there? Dallion asked.

Who knows? Youve cut the thread and purged the void, but I still cant break my vow. Theres nothing I can share about the void unless youve discovered it already.

The same old game. And the Star?

Stars come and go. The Void remains forever.

Clearly, Dallion wasnt going to get anything out of him.

I know you, Dal. You mean well, but thats not the only reason you came here. Thered be a lot more guilt in you if you just wanted to talk and make me feel better. Whats the real reason? Did Harp make you?

No, not exactly. I need a war strategist.

A field marshal. Blobs of interest appeared within the dryads body. You want a field marshal? Why?

A bunch of tower vortexes are about to appear. The Azures are on their way to claim them.

And that will increase their strength tenfold, I take it.

Theres that. Theres also the fact that the archmage and the emperors generals are saying incompetent wasnt the best word, even if Dallion was thinking it. constantly outmaneuvered by someone. I need someone better.

And you thought of me? Interesting first choice. Harp is a lot more skilled, as you saw during our little fight. Im sure she can

Shes a fighter, not a general. Dallion interrupted. There was no way to confirm what he had just said, but he had a feeling that would be the case. For a very long time, the nymph had let Nil direct

Dallions actions on the strategic front, despite being thousands of years older than him. There was a fifty-fifty chance that she had done so because it wasnt among her skills.

In case you forgot, we lost the last war, Vihrogon said with a sigh. Shocker, I know, but those are the facts.

You still won a lot before you did.

Even if we forget the part about me being a void-filled spy, military tactics have changed a bit in the last few millennia. Everything I know might be useless.

Better than trying to play catch up. Besides, the final decision will be mine. Youll just be providing advice.

And you probably wont take no for an answer?

Youre either in or out.

A new hardness emerged in Dallions voice, not one of a hunter, nor a mage, but of a noble carrying with it the weight of authority. Vihrogon recognized it well. There was a time when he too had issued orders in such a voice, but now was destined to obey them. The only difference was that Dallion was giving him a choice.

So, you plan to lead an army, the guardian said. War isnt easy for empaths. Theres a lot killed and broken on all sides. Will you be able to handle it and not darken again?

Yes. I dont have much choice on this. Ill lead from the front. All I need is for you to help me prevent the enemy from using the vortexes to boost their magic. Ill take the battle mage head on my own.

Of course. Thats what youve been saving your Moonstone for. The dryad stood up from his chair. As he did, the bog disappeared, seeping into the floor. The floor and walls dried up, losing their moss and fungus, then transformed, making the entire space larger. Roots shot up, turning into furniture, wooden statues, and minor wall decorations, as the domain of the dryad morphed into what it was always supposed to be: the home of a noble and general.

Ever since Ive known you, youve been reckless, the dryad said. You rushed into things without knowing the consequences, gambled on luck, gear, familiars, and even the Moons. Wooden scales of armor appeared on his vest, itself becoming a set of armor. This time, though, youre doing it as a noble and Ill be your general.

Chapter 800: Mage and Commander

Majesty, whispers filled the war room as all white-haired furies stood to attention at Dirohs arrival.

The crimson furies werent enthusiastic, although they also acknowledged her presence. That made things somewhat awkward for the mages. Technically, the ice fury remained a novice. A special exception had to be made in order for her to leave the Learning Hall. At the same time, she was Dallions apprentice, as well as the only acknowledged symbol of fury royalty.

Despite Aliens scheming, he had kept his promise to Dallion, bringing her along. Of course, he had also taken all the remaining battle mages from the Academy. The stakes were high, so the archmage didnt care what happened in imperial territory as long as he managed to score the desired win.

How may I assist you, battle apprentice? Diroh addressed him with a cheeky smile, bordering on mockery.

Mage, Dallion corrected. Im a mage now.

Her expression screamed oh! quickly masked by a slight bow. Congratulations on the promotion, Mage Dallion, she added. So, how may I assist?

Battle mage. A crimson fury flew in through the ceiling, leaving a tunnel behind her. The archmage has requested your presence.

Of course. Dallion sighed internally. Lets go, he said to Diroh.

Err, the archmage said The crimson fury hesitated. The invitation is only for you, battle mage.

She has to learn at some point. If someone happens to me, shell be the one to take over.

Concern emanated from everyone in the room. Word had already spread of Dallions latest exploits. Unlike Countess Priscord, the emperor hadnt been at all concerned with stories about his subjects and hadnt resorted to limiting echoes. If anything, one might almost say that he encouraged everyone, transforming Dallion into the hero of the day and destroyer of cities. Soldiers, furies, and mages alike saw in him the ray of hope they werent able to see in their previous commanders. Having him put all that hope to doubt created a logical dissonance.

Better now than in the heat of battle, he said to himself.

I understand, sir, but still the archmage

Ill be fine here. Diroh put an end to the impasse. Itll give me a chance to learn whats going on. She glanced at the war map.

Let her, the armadil shield suggested in Dallions realm. Shell have to do it either way. This way, the archmage will owe you.

You dont know Alien very well, do you, Dallion replied.

I know people quite well. Hes desperate, so until you complete your task, hell give you the world. Its afterwards that you have to worry.

The observation was spot on. Maybe Vihrogon knew the archmage after all.

Following the crimson fury, Dallion was led directly through the body of the cloud fort to a corridor outside the designated archmage chamber. The concerned expression on the womans face made it clear that only the battle mage was allowed to continue from here on.

Again with the bureaucracy, Dallion grumbled to himself. One would have thought that the seriousness of the situation would expedite things, but somehow it had only made them worse, adding new layers of uselessness on top of all the rest.

The whole surface of the door was coated with sea iron, allowing Dallion to knock. Not waiting for an answer, he then opened the door and stepped inside.

The room was far greater than it was supposed to be, designed as a direct copy of the one in the archmages home. Even the artifacts on display were the same. If one ignored the illusion, one might think that they had been teleported all the way to the Academy. Sadly, being a mage meant that it was almost impossible to completely ignore illusions.

Were heading to meet up with Katkas group, the archmage said directly. Should take us a couple of days. With luck, shell be functional by the time we get there.

Functional interesting description.

And the battle mages? Dallion asked. The enemy battle mages, he quickly clarified.

You tell me, Alien snapped. Our scouts are useless. The crimsons are only good at patrolling and our great new mage legion is obsessed with attacking anything in sight, even if theyre bound to lose. And dont get me started on the normal soldiers. Priscord is great at creating chaos and slowly assimilating territories, but when it comes to massive movements, she doesnt dare move a finger.

That only went to show that she was more competent than most Dallion had seen so far. Come to think of it, none of the archdukes were leading armies towards the area. For the most part, they had sent family members and subordinates to deal with things, very much like the emperor. Was there something that they knew which Dallion didnt? Most likely, yes.

We need to get to the power-ups, Dallion said.

What power-ups?

The vortex towers. We dont need to make use of them, just prevent the Azures from doing so.

Thats your great advice? Any level one mage could figure that out. What do you think Katka was doing?

Apparently, nothing well enough, Dallion thought.

The first thing we did was send forts to guard the areas.

Where? Dallion asked.

Alien blinked. The question seemed so illogical that anyone would struggle to take it seriously. If anyone else had asked it, they would have been laughed out of the room. However, the aura of authority granted by the emperor had made him pause.

Where did you send them to guard? Dallion repeated the question.

Just say what youre thinking! We dont have time for twenty questions.

We occupy the spot directly where the vortexes will appear. Not near, not around, directly above.

There was a fifty-fifty chance that Alien found the idea. The plan was as reckless as they came, but it was the starting point Dallion needed. As someone who had just boosted his magic trait by fifty in one go, he knew the temptation would be too great for a mage to resist. Even if all the vortexes turned out to be level eight, with so many of them, it would be a lot better than climbing up the standard way.

We take positions there and let them come to us.

Fighting in the vortexes? The archmage went to the illusion of his desk and sat down. His demeanor was a lot calmer than a moment ago. Dallion would bet that Alien was considering the odds of the vortex getting rid of all his problems in one fell swoop, and what actions he had to take in order to make that happen. You're sure?

It won't be my first time, as you know, Dallion smirked, adding a note of overconfidence in his voice. The music attack was a lot more subtle than any of his previous ones, which was why it actually succeeded.

How will you be sure you're at the right one? Accepting the idea, the archmage focused on the details.

I don't have to. As long as portals among all locations are maintained, I can go to the one I'm needed. Or all of them.

All of them Alien mused.

Of course, I'll need Adzrog for that.

Absurd! Alien's eyes glared with a flash of hatred.

We need his advice. You might be archmage, but he has a lot more experience. Besides, he built the device that

I brought you your fury. I'm not setting that man free. You've no idea what he's capable of.

That was starting to sound familiar. Clearly, Alien had a lot of issues with people of power. Dallion made a few attempts to use his empathic ability and trigger some sort of memory fragment, but to no avail. Whatever countermeasure the archmage was using deliberately or by accident it was blocking the effect.

He's not in a condition to do anything but give advice. What can he do without hands?

Alien's frown deepened for a few seconds, then slowly faded away.

Alright, a compromise, he said, casting a seven-circle spell. Although he wasn't regarded as the best mage in the Shimmering Circle, Alien remained quite skilled when it came to original spells.

A small portal appeared above the desk. Several moments later, a golden ring dropped through, landing on the wooden surface.

You really thought you're unpredictable, didn't you? The confidence in the archmage's voice had returned. Once again, he was no longer a desperate bureaucrat begging for help, but Dallion's superior and head of all mages. The old man will remain in the imperial palace until you fulfill the emperor's request. Until then, you'll make use of an echo.

Just like old times, Vihrogon said.

The ring flew right at Dallion's face in a deliberate attempt to wound him. Due to his perception trait, though, it seemed as slow as a drunk mosquito. Resisting the temptation to show off, Dallion waited until the object had almost reached his cheek before he caught it.

Nice reflexes. Alien said with a crooked smile. You've come a long way since our first meeting in the Drum. Don't let it get to your head.

I know. No ones invincible. Dallion put the ring on his left pinky finger. Initially, he braced himself for a realm invasion attempt, but none followed. Talking about the good old times why were you in Nerosal? I heard that mages didnt set foot there voluntarily.

Its not your place to know.

So, it really was linked to the Star, Dallion thought. There was a time when he believed such information would be enough to have someone banished. Now he knew better. Fortunately, it didnt matter anymore.

Anything else, sir? he asked. I want to get back to the war room.

Go ahead. Ill just keep an eye on things in case you decide to switch sides.

Ive vowed to fight the Azures months ago

Im not talking about the Azure federation. With a flick of the finger, the archmage cast a spell that opened the door. Best of luck.

There were no direct tunnels back to the war room. Dallion had to get there the old fashioned way a reminder on Aliens part who was in charge. That wasnt an issue worth bothering about. Of far greater concern was Grym and his battle mage. Both of them had proven to be considerably stronger than anyone gave them credit for. And yet there was something that didnt make sense.

Nil? Dallion said as he made his way through halls and corridors.

I really would prefer Adzorg, dear boy, the echo from the ring said.

I like Nil better. Are you alright?

In a manner of speaking. It will be a few weeks before my hands are all there again, but other than that, Im safely locked up in one of the emperors luxurious cells.

How inclined are you to help?

If youre asking whether Im being watched, no need to worry. Neither the emperor nor anyone in the imperial capital considers me a threat.

Of course, now that the timepiece was destroyed, everyone was going to say that.

When you were doing business with the Azures, did they mention what their endgame was?

Dear boy The echo sighed. Other than the Academy rebellion and Dreuds betrayal, I wasnt privy to any actual information. In turn, the Azures werent aware of my particular problem, either. We were nothing more than allies through necessity. Why, whats worrying you?

You told me that they have no chance of defeating the emperor. After seeing him in person, Dallion tended to agree with that conclusion. Archduke Dreud must have known as well. He must have seen the emperor in person, right?

Definitely more than once. The echo laughed. Archdukes are among the few that could go visit the imperial houses at any time.

Well, then how did he think hed win this? The imperial armies and a few archdukes might have been humiliated, but theres no way he believes he could win in a one-on-one against the emperor, or one against many, for that matter.

Greed and ambition make people delusional.

What if its more than that? What if there is a weapon that could destroy the emperor despite his might?

People have always speculated about the existence of powerful devices from past eras. If that were the case, the owners of such a device would use it to make their demands known, not waste troops for the fun of it.

Dallions thoughts kept going back to the colossus. The creature had said that it had been the void that pulled it into the real world. But what if that was a lie? Or rather, what if it was only a partial truth? Even when not fully restored, Adzorgs timepiece had caused punctures that summoned vortex towers in response. What if there was another device capable of doing the same on a smaller scale? Using it along with the power accumulated by absorbing the vortex towers, Grym could summon an army of colossi to send against the empire and that might prove too much even for a level a hundred and twenty level awakened.