

Leveling up 811

Chapter 811: Hidden Legacy

If the emperor's garden dazzled with its grandeur, the room where he was to meet the duchess astounded with its strict simplicity. Although made of sky silver, its walls were virtually bare, containing nothing more than a single portrait of a Tamin emperor—probably Tamin I and his wife. One glance was enough for Dallion to recognize the necklace worn by the empress—the flutterblade he had seen Falkner buy at the Night Auction of Lanitol.

Directly beneath it, sitting in a stoic wooden chair, was what Dallion expected to be Duchess Elazni. She, too, was more than familiar; Dallion recognized her from the time of his Moon trial. At the time, he was under the influence of the age spell, so she had seemed a lot bigger.

The woman's hair flowed freely down her shoulders way under the table in front, making him want to check whether it touched the floor.

The second empress, the woman said, an almost cheeky smile on her face.

If this wasn't the Imperial Palace, one would mistake her for a pampered, distant noble relation. Her clothes, although made of gem and diamond thread, were more casual than one would expect, covered in deliberate wrinkles. Even her expression was that of someone who'd just come from a long day of partying and was eager to return to it after spending a few minutes of mandatory pomp.

She was said to have been the only one to grant the emperor more than one heir, and one of the few women who any of the emperors actually fancied, the noble continued. Two things became immediately apparent: the second empress was the matriarch who had started the House of Elazni, and the woman in the room was using a rather advanced form of music skills as she spoke.

The execution was a lot different than what Dallion had experienced. When actively using his skills, he had focused on overwhelming his targets in one way or another. The woman did nothing of the sort, layering the strands of music so finely that if Dallion weren't a mage, he might have missed it. Not only that, but she was using an entire bouquet of emotions, constantly changed them as she spoke, constantly nudging towards something he couldn't determine.

Duchess Elazni. Dallion bowed, remaining two feet from the door.

Lady Elazni, she corrected. The duchess is my great grandmother.

Great grandmother? Dallion wondered.

The powerful families live a lot, Adzorg said. And unlike the archdukes, they don't bother keeping it a secret.

My apologies. Dallion looked up. Did you summon me?

No, I'm just here to keep you company until granny arrives. Although it's nice seeing you at your standard age. Her words were full of affection, aiming to make Dallion swoon. Based on how expertly she was doing it, using music to get her way had probably become the lady's second nature.

Stopping the music attack would have been simple. All that Dallion needed to do was cast a quick air spell or use his own music skills. Something told him that it wouldn't be advisable to do so, not on his first day as a noble, at least.

Thank you, he replied with a smile. Do I wait here, or can I sit at the table?

A hint of surprise flickered on the woman's face.

You saw it, didn't you? she asked. This time, her words were attempting to convey fear.

I am a mage, Lady.

Suddenly, a vertical line appeared in one of the doors, quickly growing into an opening. A sun gold metalin entered the room.

The moment she saw it, the Lady Elazni quickly stood up from the seat. Her clothes instantly straightened up, suggesting she had spent some time in their awakening realms. Two more metalins emerged, standing on either side of the formed archway. Then, finally, the duchess stepped in. Her hair was grayish white, styled like a crown around the top of her head. The gown she was wearing seemed as simple as the room was stoic. Composed of thousands of layers of quicksilver thread, it shared some characteristics of a Roman tunic. Golden rings, broches, and a rather large necklace complemented the outfit, indicating her stature. They also acted as bodyguards. Dallion could sense that each of them was, in fact, a living creature perfectly loyal and possibly as strong as Gleam.

Duchess. Dallion bowed again, this time even lower.

The lack of reaction told him that this time he was correct. The woman made her way to the seat, then sat down.

You had to become a baron on the battlefield, she said, the disappointment apparent in her voice. If you had a modicum of common sense, you would have done so here during the emperor's summons. It wouldn't have caused such a headache.

My apologies, Your Grace. What the heck am I apologizing for? I didn't want to give the Azures the heads up. They have been too well informed as of late for it to be a coincidence.

No emotion emanated from the duchess. The younger noble didn't manage the same level of self-control. Amusement was written all over her face.

Whatever's done is done, Duchess Elazni said in a neutral voice. Now we have to deal with the consequences. Sit.

She hasn't lost her touch, Adzorg said, more amused than Dallion would have liked. The old Duchess always had a flair for her.

A few weeks ago, Dallion would have felt the pressure. Not anymore, though. Looking at her, he just saw an equal with more experience. In a polite but calm fashion, he made his way to the single available chair and sat down across from the two nobles. Each step was carefully observed by the metalins.

Don't try anything, one of the creatures on the duchess said.

Where are your shardflies? the nobles asked, almost as if she had heard the conversation.

I let her go on her own errand, Duchess, Dallion replied. I expect her to be back soon, possibly a few days at most.

Pity, I would have liked seeing her. Spectral shardflies are incredibly difficult to train. Liya, it is high time for you to find a suitable companion, she turned to the other noble.

Yes, grandmother. I will.

Youve been taught the basics about being a domain ruler? The duchess went straight to the point, turning back to Dallion.

Yes, Your Grace.

Thats a small blessing, at least. With your record of annoying nobles, finding a territory will be difficult. Three archdukes would like nothing better than to kill you, and two more dont want to have anything to do with you.

Three? Dallion thought. Lanitol and Priscord he could understand, but who was the third one? Maybe that had to do with his wyvern nest rescue. Technically, it was Euryale who had annoyed her noble client, though it wouldnt be out of the question for him to have been lumped in.

What about Nerosal? the younger noble asked. Its empty right now, and it doesnt look like anyone has any

Do not interrupt, Liya. The Order doesnt like others to play with its toys, even if they are broken. It has been decided that Baron Darude will stay in the imperial city under our sponsorship.

There were a few things that would have shocked Dallion more, but this was definitely in the top five. The gears of his mind spun in motion, trying to figure out what sort of game the woman was playing as well as his part in it. If she were an archduke, he could understand her sponsoring him just to spite Priscord. The former countess was also a recent climber and probably viewed as a person who didnt know her place. Being part of the imperial family, he could see only one reasonthe woman wanted him as a trophy. Having a noble mage and empath be part of ones house was a perfect means to show off. Also, since he didnt have a domain of his own, he could be asked to earn his keep by performing certain magic or hunter tasks.

Fun

A lot of nobles start that way, Vihrogon admitted.

You are free to reject the offer, of course. Though I dont see that as being particularly beneficial for either of us.

I assume I have to give my answer immediately, Your Grace?

Marigold mentioned you were cheeky. There was a note of sadness in the duchess voice. A pity what happened to her. This isnt a decision you can drag out. If you feel you have a better play, refuse the offer. If you dont, accept it, but its never a good idea to openly play for time.

I guess its my hunters nature, Your Grace.

Too cheeky for your own good.

The necklace detached itself from the duchess neck. Springing wings, it flew onto the table facing Dallion. There didnt seem to be any bloodlust or aggression emanating from it. Still, it was better for Dallion not to take the creature lightly.

Go ahead, the noble invited. Pet it.

Dallion knew that splitting during a conversation was seen as rude. However, as much as he tried to rationalize that no one could afford to kill him so openly, the time for being reckless had passed. Reaching forward, he waited till the very last moment, when he split into two instances. In one instance, his hand touched the creature, in the other it stopped a hairs length away.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

A green rectangle emerged. Dallion switched to his second instance, causing the rectangle to disappear from reality.

Do you plan to imprison me, Your Grace? Dallions tone hardened, his hand almost on the creature.

In the imperial palace, I dont need to bother with that. We have overseers for that purpose.

Fair enough.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Reality changed. Gone was the small simple room, replaced by a giant ball room. A stage three times as large as Performers Plaza extended before him, full of hundreds of people. Initially, it seemed as if two armies were fighting against one another, but it quickly became obvious that these were merely highly skilled actors in a play. Orchestral music filled the air, as the leader of one side a general Dallion would have recognized if he had been more familiar with the history of the empire started singing.

Opera always helps me see things in perspective, the duchess said, appearing right beside Dallion. Both of them were seated in what would correspond to a theaters VIP balcony. This is the third act the culmination of events. Youd be surprised how difficult it was to gather all the echoes, even for me, but with enough dedication and patience well, you see the result.

Back on Earth, Dallion had sometimes fantasized what it would be like entering a massive cinematic battle. Now, he got to experience it firsthand. The atmosphere, the emotions of the performing echoes, even the smells were masterfully crafted for the occasion.

Do you wish to add me to your collection, Duchess?

Im welcoming you to my family. And thats precisely why you are given a choice. I cant delay your decision, but if you choose to accept the sponsorship, you will be given a mansion in the city to act as your temporary realm. From there, you will have the opportunity to rise higher or, should you decide, leave the imperial city altogether.

I get the feeling this isnt an offer most get.

Most domain rulers havent achieved what you have. You were correct to assume youd be a piece in my collection. However, that comes with its benefits. Players dont fear pieces. They might hate

them, even want to break them, but they wouldn't waste more energy doing it than it's worth. If you choose to announce to the world that you're a new player, the risks will be greater, while the rewards would be the same at best.

You're offering to limit my growth so that I can learn, Duchess?

Only when it comes to leveling. You'll have lots of opportunities to gain achievements in the process. The only price is using your particular skills to do a few favors now and again.

I believe I've gone through a similar experience in Nerosal. It taught me not to repeat it.

Stubborn to the end. The duchess clapped her hands.

Within seconds, the echoes performing the massive scene disappeared one after the other in larch clusters. Soon enough, all but one had gone. The man remaining had the appearance of a butler, dressed in a pompous set of extensive clothes that made Dallion's eyes hurt just looking at them. It was as if someone had drained half the color of the surrounding world and injected them into the clothes themselves. The red vest was particularly painful, but even that wasn't able to retain Dallion's focus for long; not after he had seen the man's face.

Taem? Dallion asked in disbelief.

Taem was the man who had originally sold him the harpsisword in Nerosal all that time ago, before vanishing without a trace. Dallion had made a few attempts to find out what had happened to him, but quickly given up.

Wonderful seeing you again, sir. The butler bowed. And might I compliment you on your achievements.

You gave me the sword. Dallion turned to the duchess.

Yes. She made a sign for the butler to disappear. It belonged to my daughter your grandmother, so it's also yours by birthright.

At this point, the sponsorship made a lot more sense.

Chapter 812: Dallion Elazni

Dallion knew next to nothing about his grandmother. His previous self in this world knew even less. She had never been brought up by anyone in his immediate family, even his grandfather was quiet on the matter. Almost all the information he had obtained was through other people: Aspion, the Nerosal overseer, and a few others. As the story went, she wasn't from a city, possibly even a noble. Dallion didn't know her name, or what she had gone through. It was established that she had died before his grandfather's banishment and well after giving birth to Dallion's mother. No one ever mentioned her name, no matter the circumstances. At the time, Dallion believed it was because she had done something people disapproved of. Knowing what he did about banishment, he could see that she most likely simply had her name erased.

I never approved of her choice, the duchess continued. Regardless of what that upstart achieved, I knew he would cause problems to everyone close to him. And I was right.

You knew who I was.

I've been keeping an eye on your family ever since their banishment. I couldn't help openly or too much, but a small thing here and there was enough. The harpsisword, a skill, information and access

to places you weren't supposed to reach. The army of echoes appeared, depicting scenes of Dallion's past. Even deals with the Order were made, but it was worth it.

Dallion could tell she wasn't lying. Yet, the truth made all his achievements feel all that much cheaper. It was like learning that every choice he had made was carefully planned in advance and there was nothing he could do to fail it.

The sensation of doubt only lasted a moment. Without a doubt, the favors of his family had helped him a lot, but they couldn't control the Moons. Dallion was the one who had completed his trials, he had earned his achievements, not to mention that there were a whole lot of situations that the House of Elzani couldn't be involved in. They didn't know about Pan, the fallen south, of the world of furies he had ventured into.

Just enough gifts to give me a chance? he asked.

You are my lineage, after all. There were a few moments in which there was some doubt, but if you weren't able to achieve at least as much as you have, you wouldn't have deserved the name Elazni.

Arrogant even when she meant well. Given her position, it probably took a remarkable effort to have this conversation.

For the moment, only a few know. Your exploits have allowed me to keep an eye on you without attracting too much attention. Others did it as well. At times, you were a source of constant betting. Would you do this? Would you fail to achieve that? She waved her hand as she spoke.

Did you win anything?

A bit, though not as much as I should have. You made more mistakes than not, and just when you got your act together, the emperor caused it all to end.

This was a compliment Dallion didn't expect.

The emperor himself intervened?

Not the way you think. The moment he summoned you, all betting was off. No one would risk betting against the ruler, and if there's just one option, there's no interest.

Oh, Dallion thought. So, it wasn't the compliment he thought it to be a moment ago.

Becoming a mage surprised me, as did defeating the Star.

You know about that?

Not at the time, but as I said, deals with the Order were made, and they have a tendency of giving out little favors for free now and again. Of course, with them nothing is for free; the price is just something that people haven't considered.

And what happens now, great-grandma? Do I take on the name?

I promised my daughter that I wouldn't force anything upon her or her family, so you still have a choice. You can pretend that this conversation never took place and leave. You'll get some small

trinket and honorary title to explain the summons, but after that, you'll be pretty much on your own. I'll still keep an eye on you, but now that you're a domain ruler, helping would be all but impossible.

True, apart from everything else, they were competitors now.

You could accept the sponsorship and become a noble under the name you made for yourself. You won't get the same support and privileges, but you'll get a lot more than when you're alone.

Of course, in that case, he had to be mindful of his dealings with other noble families. Everything he did would reflect on Elazni and at some point even the duchess wouldn't be able to shield him from consequences.

Or you can officially return to the family as one of my heirs.

And start the game of inheritance, Dallion added.

No need to worry about that. A quarter of the house must die for you to become next in line for control. You'll have to go through the usual tensions for position within the family, but that's about it. Plus, you'll have my granddaughter to step in if needed. She's one of the next hopefuls for my position, so you should be fine.

By that, she probably meant that no one would attempt to kill Dallion in the street. Nobles were the last to accept a sudden wildcard joining their ranks, especially if that wildcard threatened their position in the family hierarchy.

Any advice anyone could give? Dallion asked mentally.

Go for it, dear boy, Adzorg said. It would be foolish not to take advantage.

Didn't you use to tell me to be careful about the invisible strings of any deal?

I did and that didn't stop you from making all those terrible deals with the general and the Mirror Pool. In this case, though, what better could you hope to gain? The personal support of the emperor himself?

A smile appeared on Dallion's face. There was nothing higher than becoming an awakened member of the imperial family. Way back at the start of his journey in this world, the death of a distant imperial relation in Nerosal had started a war between the empire and a few neighboring countries. Dallion had been just a newbie then, but he could acknowledge the political power that the position held. Now the same and more was offered to him.

Will it come with a cage? he asked the duchess.

The woman looked at him for several seconds.

At least you're displaying reasonable intelligence, the noble said at last. Unless you're a ruler, life in this world is in a cage. The one I'm offering is simply larger and nicer than most.

At least you're honest. In that case, I accept. What do I need to do?

Just say the words once we're back in the real world. The wheels will start turning on their own afterwards.

Dallion had already made his choice. He was just about to confirm it openly when a new voice came from within his realm.

Welcome back, Master Dallion, a female voice spoke. Your grandmother would have been proud.

Millenia, in true time, had passed since he had acquired the harpsisword, but not once had she spoken using her own voice. She had never given an explanation outright, but it wasn't difficult to guess that it had to do with the weapons previous owner. One day soon Dallion intended to have a long conversation on the topic. If anyone knew details of that side of his family, it was her. Right now, he had to get the process started.

Upon his return to the real world, Dallion acknowledged his heritage. It was nothing more than a few simple words that changed his life more than anything up to this point.

Within minutes, one of the metalins escorted him outside of the room and into the Elazni section of the palace. There, he was officially acknowledged by two overseers and one imperial scholar, then allowed into one of the guest buildings. While smaller, the place was impressive in its own right, making any archdukes he had seen so far look like paupers.

Welcome, young master, a pair of tailors said in unison. Do you have any preferences regarding your attire?

Both of them were over level sixty. Come to think of it, every servant Dallion had seen in the palace was at least that much. The only people who weren't, were children and lesser noble relations.

Keep the hunter elements, he said without even asking what his options were.

Of course, sir, the lead tailor an old man with long gray hair nodded. Any mage elements?

No. Dallion was adamant. Magic was way too useful to remind everyone that he had it. With him being a new addition to the family, there would be numerous nobles who would view all of his achievements skeptically. Pretending they were right was only to his advantage. I'll take care of anything magic.

Understood, sir.

It took them less than a few seconds to take his measurements. Each of the tailors split into twenty instances, meticulously doing their job. Once they were done, Dallion decided to take advantage of his new status and go take a bath.

An entire pool of water occupied an entire room in the guest mansion. Half a dozen fury servants were also present, but Dallion dismissed them.

So, this is how nobles live? Dallion lay in the water, casting a few four-circle spells to clean himself. It felt a shame to waste the entire pool just for a bath, even if he could afford it.

Imperial, Adzorg corrected. Most nobles don't get anywhere close.

Imperial's Dallion repeated.

Better make the best of it, though. I have a feeling that the honeymoon will be sweet but short. Even considering your circumstances, youre just a baron and there are a lot of other young blockheads of similar rank itching to get into trouble.

Wont the echoes in their personal realms have something to say about that?

In theory, yes, but thats a double-edged sword. They might be even encouraged by those very same echoes to try and provoke you. Also, its not the same for domain rulers. Sending echoed there could be viewed as risky or poor taste, even when it comes to friends and family.

So, domain rulers didnt accept echoes easily just like Euryale. Could it be that she, too, had come from a noble family? The ease with which she had risen to prominence in the Alliance of Sone and Steel suggested it.

In that case, Dallion closed his eyes, I might as well enjoy it.

The bath lasted over two hours. When Dallion was done, the tailors were still patiently waiting for him in the previous room. There was not a single emotion of reproach. Both of them bowed, presenting Dallion with a selection of four outfits for him to choose from. Each of them had the crest of Elaznia five gem necklace below a lyre.

Music? Dallion thought.

It made sense. The skill must have been passed down from the second empress to her descendants. That was the reason his mother had awakened with it and how she had shared it with Dallion.

The fabrics werent made of gems, to his relief, but rather made of exotic animals, some of which Dallion had seen while a hunter. The knowledge that the unselected sets of clothes would be destroyed made his heart tighten. The only solution was to keep all of them, which he did. For the time being, he chose a shirt of sun spider silk, jaguar leather trousers, boots of swamp dragon leather, and a jacket made of shadow griffin feathers. The practicality of the outfit left a lot to be desired, but it would do for a city environment.

Thanks, Dallion told the tailors out of habit. You can go.

With a low bow, they did. Just as they exited, Liya entered.

Getting used to it? she asked in a casual manner.

It doesnt take long to get used to comfort, lady.

Duchess, she corrected.

I thought you said you were a lady.

Only when grandma is there. Youll need to get used to that. Family heads always hold the title among members of their family, even if others have the same.

You did this deliberately, didnt you? Dallion looked at her. According to his music skills, there was nothing but mischief emanating from her, but for someone raised on music skills, emotions could easily be masked and hidden. While obeying her grandmothers orders, it was also possible that she disapproved of his presence.

I'll keep that in mind, Dallion said, deliberately omitting her title.

Good. Now let's go to where you'll be living.

Chapter 813: Part of the Capital

Wow Dallion said.

When the lesser duchess had said she'd take him to the place where he'd be living, he expected something very different. As it turned out, in the world of nobles a place to live meant literally that: a plot of barren land within the city. To make things more awkward, he could feel the envy emanating from every onlooker in the area—all of them lesser nobles, awakened or not.

My childhood estate was here, Liya said with a hint of nostalgia. One acre of the best location on this level of the city.

Back on Earth, this would have been referred to as prime real-estate. The lack of structures aside, it was less than a few thousand feet from the imperial palace walls. That, in itself, made it stand by association, Dallion himself politically significant.

Sorry that you had to destroy it, he said, keeping his personal emotions in check. No matter what his thoughts were on the matter, he didn't want any of them to leak out.

I didn't, the woman said with a smirk of superiority. I just moved it to one of my other domains.

Dallion nodded.

A few basic rules. You're not allowed to build towers, nothing higher than the fifty-foot mark, and no more than a quarter of it must be out of wilderness materials.

The first two requests seemed reasonable to a certain degree. The third one not so much. Back in Nerosal, nobles had gone to great pains to construct their buildings entirely of non-guardian materials. In no way could this be treated as a threat, especially in a place with so many overseers.

Nothing more? Can I build it out of glass? Dallion asked, intending it to be a joke.

If you have the skills to manage that, why not?

Won't anyone be bothered seeing me naked?

Do you want people to see you naked?

Clearly, this conversation was going nowhere.

No, Dallion ended his attempts. And I'm allowed to use any materials I choose?

That's the point. Remember that your mansion is your face to the world. Create something you would like to be associated with.

I understand.

Oh, and one last thing. Have it done by evening.

There's a time requirement?

No, but you're part of House Elazni now. If you don't prove you're fit to occupy this spot, everyone will consider that you've received it through charity.

Right. We dont want that to happen, Dallion added mentally.

In all honesty, he wasnt terribly concerned. This would only be a place for him to occasionally go to get some sleep. The recent revelation regarding his grandmother had changed that a bit. Now hed be required to play the game of nobles a bit more, though not to the point where it would prevent him from doing what he wanted.

Let me know when youre done. The duchess turned around and walked away.

Dallion was expecting her to flaunt her abilities: her speed, a rare pet, or anything for that matter. Nothing of the sort happened. The woman simply kept on walking, as if she were a non-awakened.

Thats one thing to keep in mind, dear boy, Adzorg said. The nobles here arent archdukes. They dont need or want to acquire anything through strength, but through politics. Sometimes thats far more efficient.

Right. Dallion remembered one of his awakening trials for control of a city. He had focused so much on the direct approach, acquiring allies one by one, that he hadnt seen the soft power his opponent had used on the field. The imperial capital was an arena of sheltered awakened. Here, open strength not only wasnt seen as an advantage, but by the sound of it made things more difficult. Those who the world saw as strong left for the wilderness to make their mark. In truth, they were only physically strong; in terms of political power, they were too weak to survive in the city.

Vihrogon, will you be able to lend a hand?

Of course, the dryad guardian replied. Just claim it and Ill take care of the rest.

If Dallion were still a hunter, he would have done something crude, such as crack his fingers. Being a noble, though, that wasnt the right way to impress his audience. Copying Liyas stroll, he ventured into his plot of land. There wasnt a trace of guardians there. Even the magic threads seemed a lot sparser than usual, as if someone had ripped most of them out, leaving nothing but dirt behind. Still, for what he had in mind, dirt was perfect.

REALM CREATION

The green rectangle emerged as the invisible bubble of authority spread throughout every inch of the land. Unlike last time, it took on a square shape, fitting in within the domains of others.

Name the Land you wish to create.

Darude, Dallion said loudly. It had been ages since he had used it for his battle cry. It had served him well for a name all this time, but he no longer had any need. After all, he was an Elazni now.

You have created the Land of Darude Level 1.

You have full control of the Land of Darude.

An onyxfly has been made the lands guardian.

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny.

Onyxfly? That was a guardian type Dallion hadnt encountered before. As the name suggested, it had the appearance of a large firefly, only made of onyx.

Shield, do you need it to grow a bit? Dallion asked.

Whats the point? The area wont grow in this environment. Have your building done, then fancy it up.

Using his domain ruler powers, Dallion summoned the armadil shield guardian into the new domain. The sight of the dryad did exactly what it was supposed to, causing whispers to fill the nearby area. Everyone looking at it had a reaction. Some were impressed, even if they tried to hide it; others found it amusing or threatening, depending on their own political affiliations.

Been a while since I was the center of attention, the dryad smiled. Are you really alright with me getting all the credit?

Good one. Dallion allowed himself a smile.

As you wish.

Roots emerged from the ground. Forming clusters, they continued up, yet it wasnt tree stumps that they were forming, but walls made of wood. Like a living scaffolding, the lower floor of a mansion was built, the roots continuing further up as they formed columns of the second floor.

Should they be this surprised? Dallion wondered. Dryad guardians arent rare.

Its all a matter of imagination, dear boy, Adzorg said. No one has ever thought of using them in such fashion. Keep in mind that, unlike you, the majority of the world doesnt spend time talking with their guardians.

Wooden branches emerged at the top of the structure, twisting into an elaborate set of tiles to form the roof. Ripples went through the entire surface, filling in gaps and smoothing all imperfections, until finally a fully complete mansion was there, complete with internal floors and staircases.

I didnt add doors and windows since I didnt know what youd like, the dryad said. So, what do you think?

Its a bit too dryady? Dallion ventured.

Dont be a critic.

Its fine. Ill just add a few personal touches.

Now it was time to improve things. Taking a slight breath, Dallion summoned the domain guardian. One strike was enough to shatter it, bringing the area to level two. That wasnt the main point of Dallions plan, though. What he really wanted was to change some of the material using the improvement selection abilities he had developed at the Academy.

Normally, wood would only be able to be improved to another type of wood, but there always were exceptions. With enough skill, one could change that to petrified wood, and from there it was the same as improving stone.

DARUDE Level increased

The LAND has been improved to petrified oak.

Interesting. The area was treated more like a mansion than an actual domain, even if he had control over it. Apparently, space remained the deciding factor.

DARUDE Level increased

The LAND has been improved to green quartz.

The walls of the structure gleamed in a deep, opaque green. If Dallion wanted to, he could have gone further, changing it into a more exotic material. However, for the moment, it was enough. He had fulfilled the unspoken requirement of his great-grandmother, and also made a comfortable home in the process.

I still preferred my version, Vihrogon crossed his arms.

You can deal with the furnishing. He turned to the dryad. You claim to know me, after all.

Better than you think.

Ill go check out the neighbors.

Of course you will. Just one piece of advice dont push it too much on your first day. All that makes a splash causes ripples.

Waving his hand as he left, Dallion stepped out of his domain. The moment he did, he felt as if the air had been knocked out of him. It wasnt painful, or even violent, just the sensation that all control had been taken away from him. While in his mansion, he had the power to control reality itself. Out here, though, he was nothing more than a guest who had to follow the rules made by the emperor.

No wonder nobles dont visit each other willingly, he thought.

The construction of the building over, the onlookers returned to their usual life of doing nothing. Staring too much was considered poor form, and more importantly, it was an admission that someone had done a better job than them. Even as Dallion walked, several buildings changed appearance, their domain owners quickly venturing into their realm to reduce the contrast between the new building and their own. By evening, it wouldnt be a stretch to say that the entire neighborhood would have gone through several level ups.

Out of curiosity, Dallion glanced at Liya. The woman was still within view, but almost deliberately didnt turn around to check on his progress. Having the title, she did. There were no doubt dozens of echoes who had reported exactly what had happened. Her status wouldnt allow her to show any favor or support, though.

Not bad, a voice said nearby.

A noble a few years older than Dallion raised his half-full glass of wine in the form of a greeting. He didnt appear special in any single way. His clothes were made of gem threads, but by no means as intricate as most nobles Dallion had come across so far. His face was long and angular not unhandsome, but nothing that would gain attention, even in a normal setting. Even his level was in

its mid-twenties. The only thing of any significance was the emblem marking him as part of House Elazni.

So, youre the new kid? The noble took a sip of his drink.

Dallion split into a few instances, looking around. There was no way someone as weak as this would challenge him alone.

Hey, no need for that. Ive no aspirations for the seat. I just thought Id welcome you, cousin.

Leeches, Adzorg said, from Dallions personal realm. All families have them. Theyre pretty weak, so no one thinks much of them one way or another. They make it their business to be friends with everyone.

I know the type, Dallion replied.

Good work with the shack. He finished the glass, then tossed it to the ground. The object fell down, but instead of smashing, the ground beneath it curved to cushion its impact, preventing it from shattering. Thats sure to turn a few heads.

Unwilling to engage in a conversation, Dallion looked at the glass.

Oh, dont worry about that, the other said dismissively, completely missing the point. The overseers will take care of that. Whats the point of living in a civilized place if they cant do that much?

Right

So, need a guide? I know everything that goes about the capital. Well, all the important stuff anyway.

Not really, Dallion wanted to say. In the past, he would have without question. But as a baron, he couldnt afford such behavior, not before he became established.

Sure. Show me around. Dallion approached. If the leech knew everything there was, why not take advantage. There are a few places Id like to visit.

Chapter 814: Leeches and Challenges

The imperial capital was a lot less organized than Dallion expected. For one thing, there didnt seem to be any logic regarding which areas were valuable and what not. It was obvious that everything within a few thousand feet from the imperial palace would be seen as premium real estate, but besides that, there was no logic. Clusters of noble mansions were scattered everywhere like cherries on a pie. Between them were lesser estates, guilds, artisanal establishments, and the local equivalent of taverns. Strangely enough they had a peculiar resemblance in appearance and atmosphere to what Dallion imagined cafes on the French riviera would be back on Earth.

Majestic guildhalls larger than castles rose above the common buildings, covered in flags. Based on the magic within, Dallion could tell that a large part of the awakened within them were of Marchs caliber, at least.

After a while, and despite Ber Elaznis incessant chatter, Dallion started seeing some interesting patterns. For starters, all artisan workshops had a Radiant mark displayed proudly on their signs and doors. Back in Nerosal, only snobs and nobles used Radiants for anything. Their service was good, but not at the exorbitant prices they demanded. Here, money wasn't an issue, so it was all a matter of prestige.

By the way, don't let any guilds poach you, Ber said, noticing Dallion's interest in a rather impressive guildhall the size of a fortress. Wait for at least a month, so you can start comparing offers.

What do you mean? Dallion asked and already regretted it. If he had any sense, he would have asked Adzorg within his realm.

All the big guilds would love to have someone like you. Level eighty, mage, even empath, if what they say is true. The man looked at Dallion expectantly.

It is. Dallion sighed internally. There was no point in hiding it now, especially since everyone of significance was already aware.

Any guild master will have to be an idiot not to make you a senior member. Oh, and don't fall for the captain trick.

Dallion knew he'd regret it, but decided to ask anyway.

What's the captain trick?

They offer what looks like a great deal, but have the condition that you're a captain. Then it turns out that you have to spend days each month doing stuff at the guild.

Several days each month? Dallion asked in his most sarcastic tone. Sounds like a total ripoff.

I know, right?! Clearly the wine had made his cousin oblivious. Like what are you? Some low-born riff raff? No, thank you. You've no idea how unscrupulous some people can be here. To be safe, hold out until one of the imperial guilds approaches you. Those had branches in most of the provinces, so won't have you do nonsense. They're more interested in adding you to their members list before some of their competitors.

How has someone like him managed to survive? Dallion asked within his personal realm.

No one wants to dirty their shoes squishing a frog, dear boy, Adzorg replied. People like him are usually ignored unless they get too annoying. Of course, one harsh word will have him quickly shut up if you think it'll be better.

The offer was tempting, but would cause more annoyances than it would remove. Incidentally, while Bev had a story to say about almost everything they walked past, he was suspiciously silent when it came to gossip. In a city such as this where nobles backstabbed each other on a daily basis, there were bound to be thousands of stories going back to the establishment of the city. Yet Ber deliberately avoided them.

You know what? he asked, grabbing a full glass of liqueur from a random street table. No one blinked an eye. How about

Do you know where the nearest citadel is? Dallion quickly interrupted.

He expected a trace of bitterness to emanate from the noble. Instead, the only emotion that came from the man was fear. And Ber wasnt the only one it was coming from. Everywhere around, people continued with whatever they were doing. Nearly all of them had averted their gaze, some even walking away in a deceptively calm fashion.

Anything you can say about that, Adzorg? Dallion asked.

To be honest, Im not entirely sure, dear boy. The emperor and the Order were never particularly fond of each other, but Im not aware of anything else happening.

Do you think the emperors rockets could have changed that?

Without a doubt they have, but you have to remember that the larger an organization is, the slower it reacts. I wouldnt be surprised if bishops have been going in and out of the imperial capital nonstop ever since the announcement. However, that should be all.

Ber, Dallion said with the tone of a teacher whod caught a student cheating during a test. Is anything wrong?

The other made a futile attempt to mask his emotions, but all he managed to do was fractionally decrease their intensity. As someone who had a music skill at six, it wasnt difficult to tell exactly what was going through his head. The man was probably aware of this, for he held his wineglass between himself and Dallion.

Absolutely nothing, he said with the fakest smile one might have. A quick toast? he tilted his glass forward.

Dallion knew perfectly well what this was an invitation for. Faster than the eye could see, he tapped the glass surface with his finger.

ITEM AWAKENING

Reality shifted, bringing him in a room of glass with a swimming pool of liqueur in it.

The GLASS is Level 5

A blue rectangle hovered about the pool, a few steps away from Dallion and his distant relative.

You are in a medium glass hall.

Defeat the guardian to change the GLASS destiny!

You really have no stops, Ber said with a bitter smile. There was talk that you were too much, but I didnt think youd go that far.

Go ahead. Dallion crossed his arms. Tell me why I went too far.

The Order. On the glorious day of victory, a bishop went to the imperial palace. Noones sure what was said there, but shortly after the discussion, all temples within the capital were cast out.

So, domains could be cast out? Dallion thought. It stood to logic. Dallion had the power to cast out any entity from his domain, except particularly strong invaders.

In this world, it stood to reason that the same could be done with buildings or even entire areas as well. Given enough power and authority, a domain ruler could move about houses at a whim, rearranging neighborhoods, adding lakes, or even shoving entire forests into the wilderness.

There still are a few clerics here and there, but one might say that they are here in a personal capacity. For all intents and purposes, the Order doesn't exist here, and has never existed.

That bad?

Ber nodded, confirming Dallion's suspicions. The tensions he had felt between the empire and the Order must have abruptly escalated, giving rise to a silent cold war.

What about outside the capital?

Business as usual, I think? It doesn't matter much. The emperor rarely leaves his palace. Well, most of the important nobility stays here, he added with a subtle jab at Dallion. The thing is that the emperor doesn't like to be reminded of those events, and his overseers are always listening.

You've probably heard that I've worked for the Order, Dallion said.

Technically, he was still working for them. The agreement was that he capture Adzorg, destroy his doomsday machine, and go to the nearest temple or citadel to report. In his mind he had no doubt that the Order was perfectly well informed of everything going on. Still, proper etiquette demanded that he still have a chat.

That was before you joined the family. From today on, you hate the Order as much as the rest of us.

So much for flexibility. Dallion was about to ask a few more questions, when the other disappeared, leaving him alone in the realm of the glass.

In the past, Dallion would have immediately rushed out as well to confront the man. Having matured enough, he preferred to focus on larger things instead. With no way to talk to the Moons or the Order, he truly was locked in a golden cage with no chance of escape. The only way out was to ask the duchess for a key, but it was very uncertain that he would get it.

Looking around, a feeling of nostalgia swept through him. There was a time when venturing into realms had seemed so new, just like magic. Dallion remembered how he'd take every step with caution as he sought the guardians chamber.

Now, he had the means to challenge the guardian outright thanks to his familiars. And should he not wish to, his magic vision let him read the magic threads in the realm, indicating exactly in which direction he had to go if he wanted a fight.

Think we should have a go, Nox? Dallion asked.

A sleepy meow conveyed the sentiment there was no point. True, he could improve the glass all the way to diamond; or even get creative and make it into a material it wasn't supposed to be. But what if he did? None of the fights would present a challenge, and the item itself would end up becoming flawed due to a number of successive improvements in such a short period of time.

Taking one final look, Dallion returned to the real world.

To new beginnings. Ber raised his glass in the air, then gulped it down in one go.

Same as before, he didnt bother placing it on a level surface, tossing it on the ground, instead. And just as before, the street made sure to catch the glass without letting it break.

So, how about I introduce you to a couple of friends? The noble continued as if nothing had happened. They arent from the family, but they are pretty stand-up guys. Women too, of course. Over a dozen acquaintances have been asking me about you, actually.

I bed. Why not? Dallion shrugged.

Great. I

Dallion Darude! a noble dressed in clothes of gem threads mixed with sun gold shouted from a hundred feet away. He seemed a few years younger than Dallion, holding a chain saber that was at least two centuries old. Didnt think Id see you here.

Is that one of your friends? Dallion whispered to Ber. Even with a mind trait over ninety, he couldnt remember ever seeing the cocky youngster. There was no doubt that he was a noble or of some significance. Even his strength wasnt to be neglectedan awakened level was impressive anywhere in the empire, even if it wasnt close to being a domain ruler.

Nope, I do know him, though. Hes Count Salistas younger brother.

And whos that? Dallion didnt even try to lower his voice when asking the question.

First count of the Lakah Province, Ber replied. He had some successful skirmishes against some neighboring country, so he got an imperial invitation. Hes friends with the third grandson of Duchess Mizovy.

By the looks of it, the rival imperial family had made its move. Unable to directly attack Dallion they had found someone who could be glad to perform that favor for them. It wasnt a bad choice, either, since Lakah province had a reputation of raising skilled warriors.

I heard that youre a baron now. The Salista noble casually made his way towards Dallion, all the time keeping a hand on the hilt of his saber. And supposedly a member of the Elazni.

I guess news doesnt travel fast enough in your province. Dallion remained firm. I am a member of House Elazni. You arent.

It didnt go unnoticed that a crowd of people had started to gather. Unlike the onlookers present when Dallion had built his mansion, these were different. All of them had fancy clothes and illustrious house emblems embroidered on their clothes.

Then, lets change that. The youngster drew his saber, then removed the scabbard and tossed it on the ground. I challenge you to a duel.

Chapter 815: Noble Dual

An official duel. It had been a while since Dallion had taken part in a duel. As things stood, he didnt even know whether the person who had challenged him back in Nerosal was still alive. A lot of things had taken place in the last few years, including an outright civil war within the Wetie province.

Looking at the noble facing him, though, Dallion had the feeling the rules would be slightly different this time.

Whats the protocol about these things? he asked within his personal realm.

Dont run away, Adzrog said with a dry laugh. In all seriousness, dear boy, there are no specific rules. As a domain ruler, you could come up with anything. The only duels that matter in your world are outright wars. Everything else is for show, so you decide how to handle it.

No rules. That made sense, given what the Moon had mentioned during the last gate. It also meant that Dallion had the authority to make an ass of himself or his opponent.

Nothing to say? the noble said, full of bravado, but anyone with a high enough music skill could tell he was tense.

And to think I used to be like that, Dallion thought. However, while there was a time when he had challenged nobles ten levels above him, he had the benefit of being a hunter.

Are you sure you want to? Dallion asked. Its a bit too early to take me head on.

Thats why he isnt. A plump brown-haired man a short distance off smirked. Even among the crowd, he stood out with a set of trousers made of dark onyx thread, and a shirt that shifted color from ruby red to emerald green. Most notably, he had the Mizovy crest prominently displayed on his clothes in sun gold threads. He challenged you to a test of skill, not a fight.

That sounded like a poor excuse and a use of semantics. There was little doubt in anyones mind that Dallion would win. The issue was how hed handle the challenge itself. Would he refuse, would he go all out, use magic, or impose additional restrictions on himself to level the playing field?

Fine, Dallion said, then cast a three-circle spell, summoning his harpsisword. Ill fight you without magic.

The murmur in the crowd was less than he expected. Apparently, the mentioned condition was the very least he could do.

Any other advantages youd like?

This time his comment hit its mark, causing a small explosion of anger to occur within the Salista noble.

Scum, he said through his teeth.

What he means is bumpkin, someone else from the crowd added. You dont even know how to handle a duel.

Then why doesnt someone explain it? Dallion asked, bursting into twenty instances.

Instantly, all laughter and most of the chatter ceased. No one could tell whether Dallion was serious or not, but no one wanted to risk finding out. After all, it was all fun and games until someone got

skewered by an imperial. Even if he were a baron and a wildcard from outside the capital, he remained a member of the imperial family.

Permit me to do so, Baron, a female voice said, as a black-clad figure with platinum blond hair suddenly emerged on the scene.

Another overseer? Dallion wondered.

This was the third one he'd seen so far and, if Ber could be believed, there were many more.

Since this is a challenge duel, Viscount Salista is allowed the first strike. The overseer said. Meanwhile, the nearby buildings moved back, transforming the section of the road into a circular arena. The area will be neutral and controlled by me. The duel continues until surrender and might take place within the real world as well as any of your awakened realms.

Combat during realm invasion? It wouldn't be the first time Dallion had used such a trick in battle, but was surprised the overseer, and everyone else, was so open about it.

Magic and combat splitting aren't permitted. The overseer turned to Dallion. Killing outside of an awakened realm is not permitted. Leveling up during combat, she turned to the viscount, is allowed but not recommended.

Interesting that she hadn't mentioned anything about stakes or rewards. Clearly, victory and bragging rights were reward enough. Looking at it from that perspective, higher-level awakened were at a disadvantage. No one was going to be impressed should Dallion win, yet he'd be the laughingstock if he were to lose. What was more, the no killing limitations made things tricky; nothing prevented his opponent from going all out, relying that Dallion would keep himself from inflicting any actual harm.

Gradually, all the instances faded away, leaving only one.

When do we st

Before Dallion could finish, the sabers blade shot out at him like a venomous snake. Segments stretched like a whip blade, though instead of having a thread to keep them together, they were linked to each other like a chain.

The speed was greater than Dallion had imagined, almost to the point of matching his own. Clearly, he wasn't the only one with overpowered weapons and as he knew from experience, when it came to such masterpieces it was the weapon that made the warrior.

The first thought that passed through the baron's mind as the chain blade passed above his head was to reply with a line attack. On a battlefield, this would be the best solution. Here it would earn him a one-way trip into a prison item.

Crap! Dallion thought. Just like sheltered nobles were clueless when it came to real fighting, he had a lot to learn when it came to pretend combat. The way his opponent stood, there were a dozen ways for Dallion to slash him to pieces, yet all of them involved actually hurting the viscount. I don't suppose cutting off an arm would be okay?

The heavy sigh from Adzorg made it obvious what the answer was.

Taking advantage of Dallions reaction, the viscount attacked again, twisting the saber like a whip.

Blocking the strike with his own blade, Dallion leaped up, avoiding the segments as they attempted to coil up around him. Unfortunately, the block was all his opponent needed.

REALM INVASION

There was no time to hesitate.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

He had reacted fractions of a second after the red rectangle had emerged, but even that proved not to be enough. Three massive stone arches had emerged in the sea, each containing a portal through which dozens of ships sailed towards the shore at full speed. Each ship was filled with about three dozen echoes of warriors whose level vastly exceeded that of their owner.

Ah, the good old hidden attack strategy, Adzorg noted, appearing beside Dallion. Useless in all but one case, but quite devious when it comes to duels.

You dont say.

It was popular back in the day when people relied on armies to defend their personal realms. Then it quickly fell out of favor.

Why did that happen?

As it turned out, bribing the original of a few echoes proved surprisingly efficient. After that, people started having trust issues. And, of course, only the lowest of the low would resort to making multiple echoes of the same person.

Of course. Having four echoes of himself, that was probably another reason for Dallion to be ridiculed among polite society.

Normally, hed be able to dispose of the invading force without an issue. One major spell and the entire sea could be transformed into fire. Sadly, he had given his word that he wouldnt use magic.

Better hide for a bit Vermillion, Dallion said, then dashed towards the bay of his realm.

One after the other, islands in the distance submerged until there were none of them left. At that point, Dallion leapt up and did a triple line slash.

Three lines of destruction split the air, aiming for the small flotilla of ships. The wooden hulls burst into splinters. Simultaneously, the ships entire crews leapt up, avoiding the attack.

Battle hardened, Dallion said to himself. Good thing they werent furies or he might have to resort to different means.

Vihrogon, lend a hand, will you? Dallion said as he dropped to the ground. Just dont use any magic or splitting.

Wheres the fun in that? The dryad didnt sound particularly pleased, but appeared nonetheless, holding a pair of wooden blades.

In one swift dash through the water, he reached the first concentration of enemies, dispatching them with as much ease as a child popping a bunch of balloons.

Leaving others to fight your battles? Adzorg asked.

No. Dallion smirked. Im a noble now. Im delegating.

In truth, he was standing back, waiting for the inevitable follow-up. If someone had come up with the plan to overwhelm his realm with numbers, it had to be because they were keeping something in store. If not, this would end up being the most pathetic attempt at a realm invasion.

The dryad kept on slashing enemies as he danced on the water with his pair of blades. Some of the attacking echoes attempted to put up a fight, often even combining in groups. Sadly, being reduced to a single hit made things practically impossible. With Vihrodons skill level, the best thing they could hope for was to get a few hits in before they were poofed out of existence.

Where are you? Dallion concentrated, looking at the invaders. Ships kept on entering through the portal arches, but there was no sign of the viscount.

Just then, Vihrogons blade met metal. The echo he was supposed to have pierced not only didnt disappear, but did a multi attack of its own, causing a cluster of red rectangles to stack up in the air.

For the smallest of moments, the magic threads of the entity shone through, letting Dallion know that it was anything but an echo.

Get back! Dallion ordered, speeding along the waters surface like a flat stone along a lake.

Spinning both blades in defensive fashion, Vihrogon quickly retreated, though not fast enough to escape the ongoing attack.

Seeing the position his shield guardian was, Dallion unsummoned him from the field, then modified his realm, causing a small island to emerge.

Harp, he ordered, summoning his bladebow.

The harpsisword disappeared from his hand, reemerging in the form of Harp, who quickly engaged the enemy. This time, as their weapons clashed, the echos skin and clothes melted off, revealing none other than another Dallion.

Copyette, Dallion hissed, setting foot on the newly formed island.

So, youve come across one already? A new ship emerged from the invasion portal. On it was Viscount Salista, wearing a hull set of blossom armor. A lot of time and effort had gone into it, for it looked just as massive as Marchs, only made of sun gold. Then you know what to expect.

It was normal to face opponents with family heirlooms that contained experienced battle guardians. Even one of the Nox Daggers original guardians had been a copyette. But that wasnt the biggest issue. Among the magic threads, there was one more thing that Dallion had spotted: A thread of black void among the rest.

Where did you get the saber? Dallion asked.

Too much for you? The other smirked. Word is that the second empress had a harpsisword given to her by the emperor. The weapon has been passed down for generations until it vanished. Maybe its the one you have there?

Where did you get it? Dallion repeated.

You're not the only one to have generational weapons. The difference is that I've earned mine.

The copy-Dallion split into two, engaging with Harp. Blades clashed against one another, sending sparks everywhere. As much as Dallion didn't want to admit it, the copyette guardians' skills were close to the dryads.

Shield, can you deal with the echoes? Dallion asked, gripping his bladebow. I don't want any of them to mess up my realm.

As long as there are no others like him, shouldn't be a problem, the dryad replied.

Good. I'll deal with the viscount.

Chapter 816: Realm Jumping

A stone path rose up from the sea as Dallion rushed towards his opponent. Using magic would have been way easier, but realm manipulation was good enough.

Meanwhile, his two guardians were engaging with the rest of the invading forces. Vihrogon was having no issue dispatching the high-powered echoes. Harp, on the other hand, was presented with some difficulties. The copyette facing her was definitely not to be trifled with, creating copies of itself without breaking the rules of the duel.

Onda, a bit of help, Dallion thought.

What can I do? The teen nymph replied, not daring to appear at the scene. Everyone's stronger than me. I'll only get in the way.

Sharp cliffs erupted beneath the viscount ship, rising to the sky. The noble easily jumped off, avoiding any damage whatsoever. However, the goal hadn't been to hurt him, but to block the portal arch.

Wanting to test the skills of his opponent, Dallion launched a series of line attacks. His expectation was for the viscount to deflect them using a line attack of his own. Instead of that, the opponent twisted his body, combining acrobatics with athletics to avoid the lines midair altogether.

Sequence building? Dallion asked, surprised. It had been a while since anyone had attempted to use skill bonuses against him. Seeing that almost made him feel a whiff of nostalgia, but he still had no intention of letting the man succeed in completing it.

With a slight smile, Dallion followed up with a few point attacks aimed at disrupting the guard skill sequence.

Annoyed, the count counterattacked with a few line attacks of his own.

That's more like it, Dallion said, using his music skill to add overconfidence in his words. You should have started with that to begin with. He slashed the air again.

ATTACK NEGATED

You have negated VISCOUNT JALLY SALISTAs attack.

Attack has no effect.

Of course, you'll have to do better than that to win against me, Dallion added, this time adding weight and slowness.

Much to his surprise, the music attack ended up being successful. For someone so eager on the challenge, Dallion would have thought that his opponent would have done his homework better.

Having no intention of letting the viscount recover, Dallion leaped up, ready for a mid-air clash. Getting closer, he opened with a standard series of slashes and attacks, only to find that he was slashing air.

REALM INVASION ENDED

A red rectangle emerged. A quick glance around revealed it to be true. The echoes were gone, as was the copyette that Harp was facing. Looking at her, though, she had sustained a few minor wounds.

Whats your game? Dallion returned to the real world.

The segments of the chain saber moved on, still attempting to surround him.

Using his speed, Dallion pushed away at the weapon, rushing towards the viscount. Everyone was cheering most likely for his opponent. Out of habit, Dallion listened into the cheers, ready for a music attack. Thankfully, no one was attempting anything of the sort.

Got you! Dallion thrust the tip of the harpsisword straight at the others leg. The attack was quickly parried by a series of large sky steel scales that tore out of the viscounts left trouser, forming a protective shield around it.

Shapeshifting armor? Dallion thought.

That was the second impressive piece of equipment he'd seen. Unlike the saber, though, Dallion could feel the low hum of disdain that came from it. Without a doubt, this piece of armor was borrowed, and it didn't take kindly to it.

Shapeshifting armor and a corrupted saber. The unfortunate noble probably was clueless regarding the true nature of the gear. It was almost sad: one pretty much despised him, and the other was controlling him. The void wouldn't reveal its true intentions, of course. Like Vihrogon, it would help the best it could, possibly even providing useful advice in ways that only copyettes could. Then, out of nowhere, it would make its move. Or maybe there was more to it?

Spark! Dallion thought, doing a triple slash spin.

The first hit disarmed the viscount, sending the sword flying off in the distance. It was only thanks to the quick reaction of the observing overseer that it failed to hit anyone. The second hit was barely blocked by the scale armor piece. As for the third, it was about to strike the nobles arm, when suddenly, his clothes turned into diamond.

That had to be an item improvement. Clearly, Jally Salista wasn't that bad if he could defeat the guardian of his shirt all the way to diamond. Although there was no guarantee that the saber hadn't done it for him. Although not in his hand, the weapon was linked to the viscounts personal realm.

HARPSISWORD REALM INVASION

This again? Dallion mentally hissed.

His opponent was using an annoying hit-and-run approach, rather than taking the attacks head on. By the looks of it, his goal hadn't been Dallion, but his weapon. After all, hurting Dallion too much risked having consequences. Destroying a valuable heirloom, on the other hand, would be the ultimate humiliation, not to mention get him in trouble with Duchess Elazni.

ITEM AWAKENING

Dallion immediately ventured into Harp's realm. By the time he got there, though, the viscount had already gone.

Are you alright? he asked. At first glance, there didn't seem to be any new wounds on the nymph guardian. Soon enough, he noticed the scars done to the realm itself.

It's alright, she said in her proper voice. He's strong, but not that strong.

If only she could use her magic, this wouldn't even be a contest.

I won't let him invade again. There was a ring of determination in Dallion's voice.

You're being reckless again.

No. This time I'm being focused.

Reality shifted once more, returning Dallion to the real world. Twisting around at such speed that even nobles found it difficult to follow, he twisted, landing a punch on the viscount's diamond clothes. Normally, this wouldn't have resulted in anything. At most, Dallion would have wounded his hand at the strike. Yet before everyone's eyes, the hardened fabric shattered like glass.

Time seemed to stop as everyone slowly realized just what had happened.

Two can play at that game, Dallion whispered as his punch continued on into the stomach of his opponent.

What had occurred was that a split second after his fist had come in contact with the diamond, Dallion himself had invaded the realm. Since it was nothing but a piece of clothing, it was not linked to the viscount's personal realm. As a result, it had been easy to defeat the guardian there, changing the material into something Dallion wanted, namely glass that could be easily shattered.

Similar to before, sky steel scales wrapped themselves around Dallion's arm, attempting to lighten the blow, but even half a blow with such intensity was enough to send a substantial amount of pain throughout the viscount's body.

Suddenly, all the shouts and cheers stopped. Everyone carefully observed the noble freeze in place for a few seconds, then stumble to the ground.

Let go, Dallion said, looking at the piece of armor still round his hand. Aware of his strength, the item guardian obeyed him.

Bending down, Dallion took hold of a piece of the man's glass shirt. A week later or a second in the real world the item of clothing was back to its normal self, and fully restored. Despite everything that had happened, Dallion was in no mood to leave an item half destroyed.

Cheat! a woman with the Mizovy crest shouted. He used magic! We all saw him! The strike that disarmed Jally had magic in it.

Jally, is it? Dallion narrowed his eyes. This was another noble of House Mizovy on a first name basis with the viscount. It didnt take a genius to see what was going on. In fact, it was far more difficult to pretend it wasnt.

That wasnt magic, the overseer said, calmly making her way to the noble on the ground. It was spark. She attempted to return the saber to him, but Dallion grabbed it.

I claim this as my prize, he said.

You cant do that. Another voice from the crowd shouted.

Unfortunately, he is correct, Baron. The overseer looked at him. If the two of you were equal in level, it would have been different. Yet, your victory was largely expected. Claiming any of his possessions would be no different from stealing.

Dallion didnt believe a word of it. True, his victory had been likely, but everyone was secretly hoping that thanks to the borrowed items, the viscount would stand a chance of doing some damage, or possibly even draw blood. Unfortunately, he didnt have the political strength to argue, not yet in any event.

Then I claim the right for him to stake his saber should he challenge me again, he said. Is at least that acceptable?

Perfectly, the overseer smiled. If someone jumps into a pit despite seeing it, thats their own fault. Congratulations on your victory, Baron. It was a most splendid performance.

No one in the crowd clapped, not even those supposedly on Dallions side. The Mizovys and their allied nobles gave him a series of dirty looks and went off to other parts of the capital. The rest soon followed. Only Ber remained, concern emanating from him. While Dallion didnt think the leech had anything to do with the targeted duel, it was obvious that he wasnt too glad of the result.

No celebrating? Dallion asked, adding a subtle music nudge to find out what was going on.

Therell be reprisals for this, his cousin said. They wont do anything on your first week, maybe more, but theyve already started their plotting.

How is that different from my own family? And thats a bad thing? Dallion glared at him with more confidence than was healthy. Therell always be plotting. Besides, hes just a viscount.

He was invited to the capital.

The sentence said it all. Only people with backing were allowed here, and it was pretty obvious who the backers were.

Want to end the tour here? There was a sharp edge in Dallions tone. Just as he hadnt let enemies push him around, he wouldnt let his new family look down on him.

The concern emanating from Ber quickly turned into fear. Whichever member of House Elazni had set him up to keep an eye on Dallion was, apparently, more scary than the baron himself.

Of course not. He forced a smile. Ill be glad to show you to a few more interesting places.

Lead on.

The tour continued. Reluctantly, Ber showed Dallion a few more highlights of the city of wonders, though this time, he paid attention to what the baron wanted to see. A few blacksmiths were visited, including one of noble origin. Anyone could tell at immediate glance that only nobles worked there, but what was of greater interest was that so did several domain rulers.

Count Pilih, the leech said as they observed from an acceptable distance. Story is that his ancestors crafted the first emperors sword and shield. Nonsense, if you ask me, but their skill has earned them a few favors. Though they cant be considered major players, its always good to have them on your side rather than against you.

How do I get an introduction?

you dont? Ber sounded shocked at the question. Youre an Elazni. We let others come to us.

There was no way Dallion would let the chance pass. Having reached his ripple quota for the day, or more likely the week, he had no intention of acting beneath his rank. Talking directly wasnt the only way he could get a message through, though.

Hey, he addressed the item guardians. Id like to talk to one of your creators. Can you arrange that?

There was no answer. With so many overseers, not to mention an emperor empath, the local guardians had learned to be tightlipped in front of strangers. Even so, that was no reason for Dallion to give up.

I wont hurt or challenge anyone. Im a forger as well.

A pair of tongs fell off the rack it was on, hitting the stone floor of the open forge with a loud clang. Everyone from the count to the last apprentice looked at the tool. Judging by their reaction, this was the first time anything of the sort had happened.

Several seconds later, Count Pilihs glance shifted from the instrument to Dallion.

Subtle, Dallion thought as he nodded slightly.

The other didnt react, but there was no denying that contact had been made. Now the ball was in the counts court.

Lets go. Dallion turned around, quickly followed by Ber.

By the time Dallion returned to his mansion, the structure was unrecognizable. While the basic shape remained the same, Vihrogon had added thousands of small touches, making it not only complete, but elegantly comfortable. More interestingly, Taem was also present, waiting in front of the front door, dressed in an unmistakable butlers outfit of white silk and green jade threads.

Welcome back, young master, he said with a slight bow.

Hi, Taem. Ill be having a guest. He was kind enough to show me about the city.

That is indeed commendable, young master, but I fear it won't be possible.

Possible? Dallion's expression changed to serious. What won't be possible?

The duchess has invited you to dinner, sir. Your presence alone is required.

Chapter 817: The Final Piece

This was the second time Dallion was called to the duchess in as many days. Even so, he knew this was a big deal. Being called to have dinner with the head of an imperial family—even a branch family—was a distinct honor. As he was escorted there by Taem, who, as it turned out, was tasked to be his personal chamberlain, Dallion quickly got a brush-up course in the etiquette when it came to similar events.

His attire, interestingly enough, wasn't viewed as being of particular importance. His manners while there, though, were an entirely different matter. Apparently, he could no longer afford the rudeness and frivolity of his first meeting. Dining with the duchess wasn't even reserved for all the members of her immediate family. At most a dozen would be present, normally half that number, all of which knew their place, which meant they only spoke when addressed by the duchess, never interrupted her, and never addressed anyone else without her explicit permission.

A small loophole existed—there was no mention regarding conversation with item guardians; Dallion planned to take full advantage.

Think that the duchess will be upset with my duel? Dallion asked while walking through a hallway wider than his entire new mansion.

I cannot say, Master Dallion, Taem replied. You were victorious in all ways, so maybe you won't incur her disapproval.

That was the most political answer Dallion had heard in a while. It wasn't like he blamed the butler. The unfortunate soul had gone all the way to Nerosal, pretending to be a merchant peddler, all so he could give Dallion his birthright.

You know, I've been wondering. Dallion took advantage of the few remaining seconds he had to speak freely. How did you get me to buy the harp's sword? Combat splitting? Music? It can't have been luck?

It wasn't luck, young master. It was a test. Had you not felt the link and chosen any other weapon, your relation with House Elazni would have ended there and then. Fortunately, you were guided to your birthright.

Yeah, which one? Dallion wondered.

So far, he had three: his birthright of Dherma Village chief, his birthright as an imperial noble, and his birthright from his other self on Earth.

The hall ended in a massive door of glass. Try as he might, Dallion was unable to see through it. It was as if the transparent surface was showing him anything else except what lay beyond.

The pair of sky silver metalins guarding the door stepped to the side in perfect sync.

Why are there no other people? Dallion asked within his realm.

Thats something youd have to tell me, dear boy, Adzorg said. Ive never been allowed here.

One of the metalins handed Dallion a small platinum earring. One look was enough to tell that it was a blocker item.

I guess just walking in there would have been too easy. Dallion took the piece of jewelry and clipped it onto his left ear. The moment he did, the door opened.

I shall be right behind you, young master, Taem said, remaining in his place.

The fact that he was allowed to join in spoke a lot about his place in the staffs hierarchy. No doubt he was one of the trusted servants the old duchess had.

A hall the size of a town square came into view. Metalins and bladerers of sky silver and crystal stood at all the walls, motionless, as if they were part of the decorations. Massive paintings were on the walls, all depicting important scenes of the family history mostly the second empress and her husband. There was no denying that she was depicted as beautiful in an almost common sort of way. Her clothes were outright simple compared to what nobility wore today. The only pieces of jewelry were her familiars and her weapon the harpsisword that Dallion now held in his position.

Guess now I know why so many people were interested in it, he thought.

Dallion, the duchess said from the head of the table. That, too, was massive, large enough to hold over a hundred people. At present, only eight seats were filled. Take your seat.

Which one of you is my seat? Dallion asked the item guardians in a relaxed fashion.

That would be me, young sir, a chair replied. It was located three seats away from the duchess on her right side. Incidentally, Liya Elazni was on the same side, though seated immediately next to her grandmother. Between her and Dallions seat was a tall, dry middle-aged man, who looked more like an ancient academic than a noble. The glow coming from him clearly showed he was a domain ruler. In fact, all of the people seated were domain rulers, and each had a trusted servant standing a few steps behind.

Reaching his seat, Dallion waited for Taem to pull it back, then sat down.

I heard that you created some commotion today, the duchess glanced at him, slicing an exotic amber orange fruit Dallion hadnt seen before. The entire city is talking about your new mansion, and who you used to create it.

The faintest of music threads within her word indicated that was, in fact, a question.

I thought that a dryads touch would be welcome in the city, Duchess, he replied. Especially given the recent developments.

The outside doesn't concern you now. The sudden shift of tone almost smothered Dallion. He could feel the weight she put into her words. There are enough dangers within the city you should focus on. Your misfortunate duel was just a taste.

A boy the same age as Dallion, sitting four seats on the duchess other side, placed his knife and fork on his plate in indication that he wanted to speak.

Yes, Tors? The duchess offered him a glance.

I don't think it's suitable for him to be using the heirloom, the man said. Giving him a plot here was generous enough. He's part of the family now, so he should return

Should? Duchess Elazni interrupted. You're my favorite great-grandson, but don't talk about things you don't understand. The sword was earned by his mother, and she decided that he have it, even if we don't mention the name of that man in this house.

There was no need to guess who that man was. Could it be that the duchess herself had orchestrated the banishment of Dallion's grandfather? It wasn't out of the question, though it didn't seem likely. Dallion's grandmother wasn't here, which meant that she was either dead, or banished along with him, but to a different place. Personally, Dallion hoped she was banished; that granted him the option, even if faint, to find her and maybe even bring her back to Dherma.

The guardian has accepted him, which makes the weapon his, the duchess said firmly. In any event, this isn't the reason I called you here. Introducing my long-lost grandson was just a comfortable pretext.

Everyone stopped eating.

There's been a shift in the power of the world, she continued. Ever since that idiot's death in Nerosal, the smaller players have been striving to form an alliance with the stronger powers. Destroying several countries of the Azures only hastened that effort. As of yesterday, the last neutral dukedom has joined the Alliance of Stone and Steel. That leaves three major powers in the world, and that means the wilderness is ready for expansions once more.

Dallion would have very much liked to be able to have a few words with Vihrogon or Harp. Both could illuminate him far more on that matter and others. Sadly, the conversation was too important to have any echoes or guardians listen in. Looking closely, Dallion was able to see identical earrings on all participants, even the duchess herself.

It's only a matter of time before the emperor opens the borders for conquest. And you all know what that means.

The expressions of the others round the table suggested that he was mostly right. While most probably knew what she was referring to, Dallion didn't. All he could do was guess. Based on what he had heard so far, he suspected that this was an invitation for volunteers to venture into the wilderness and claim new territory for the empire. It was merely speculation, but in times such as these, glory went to the decisive, so he quickly placed his fork on the plate in front of him.

Immediately, all looks turned his direction.

Dallion? the duchess acknowledged him.

Id like to volunteer to increase our domain, duchess, he said quickly. Im familiar with the wilderness and

Commendable, she didnt let him finish. But you are mistaken. The emperor decides who will go where, not anyone else. The only way to gain his blessing is to acquire his favor within the capital. There was a slight pause. Youre still yearning for the key that will let you out of the cage.

Theres still a lot of wildness within him, Liya said without permission. Clearly, sitting next to the duchess came with its benefits.

He has the best chance, the bulky man on the other side of the duchess said. Round as a teapot, he had made an attempt to mask what nature had granted him with expensive and fanciful clothes, ending up making it even worse. Hunter, mage, and briefly favorite of the emperor. Unless you want to go out there. He gave Liya a warning glance.

No. The duchess uttered a single word that felt as if ten tons of iron had fallen on everyones shoulders.

Dallion could see the music within it, he even knew what it was, and yet found himself unable to counter it in any way. By the looks of it, he wasnt alone. Some were faring better than others, but everyone was suffering.

He will not take part in the selection, she declared. His achievements will make him the likely candidate and attract all eyeballs. Meanwhile, our real hopes will subtly slide through the layers of the city, working their way to the emperors favor. Am I clear?

The weight was lifted from Dallion's shoulders. Quickly, the rest of the nobles nodded. After a few moments, so did he.

Tors, you wanted a chance to shine. Here it is. Succeed or fail, its all up to you now.

Thank you, great grandmother. A smile flickered on the nobles face.

And as for you, Dallion. The duchess raised the index finger of her right hand. On cue, the servant behind her stepped closer, placing a small wooden box on the table by the duchess. A small gift to celebrate your stay. Think of it as compensation, if you wish.

Dallion was just about to use a spell to fetch the item, when Taem made his way all across the table, at impressive speed, took the box, then returned to his previous spot, placing it in front of Dallion.

A bribe? Dallion looked at the box.

Given the opulence the duchess lived in, he had no idea what the gift could be. His only fear was that it might turn out to be a useless heirloom with great historical significance: the pinky ring given to the second empress, a locket that marked him as her direct descendant, or maybe it could be something useful as one of her familiars?

The material of the box overflowed with magic, making it impossible to tell what could be inside. After several seconds, Dallion put an end to his personal suspense and opened it.

Really? He almost asked out loud.

There was a single skill gem in the box. Such a gift was beyond generous. Hunters spent their entire lives hoping they'd come across something of the sort, even if they didn't need to use it. And that was not all. This wasn't any skill gem, but the one that Dallion had been lacking all this time: carving.

I trust it's to your taste? the duchess asked.

Dallion found himself incapable of replying. Instead, he reached down and grabbed it.

CARVING skills obtained!

Chapter 818: The Marquis' Warning

TWELVE SKILLS

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

It took you a while, but you finally did it. So, what's next?

Cheeky as always, Dallion thought as he looked at the purple rectangle that flashed before his eyes.

In all honesty, he never believed he'd acquire that skill. Adzorg had mentioned that sometimes awakened acquired new skills after passing a gate. Since that hadn't happened upon becoming a domain ruler, Dallion expected it never would, and yet his own family had managed to surprise him.

Thank you, duchess. He closed the box. I did not expect anything of the sort.

That's the strength of House Elazni, she said. We know what others want even before they expect it. The founder of our family granted everyone in her line the ability to reach high levels of music. Although she's said to have been an impressive warrior, she was aware that some feats only music could achieve. Now, you must learn the same and when you do, you'll find that you need no key to open the cage; others will willingly do it for you.

The rest of the dinner passed in complete silence. If one concentrated, though, they could sense that while no verbal sounds were made, the emotions emanating from everyone constantly changed, forming something of a conversation.

Dallion was far from skilled in that discipline, but even he could follow the basic mood, even if not the nuances. That was impressive, to say the least, especially since everyone was wearing blocker items.

Close to an hour after the start, the duchess rose from her seat and left the hall, followed by her servant. The rest of the nobles waited until a few minutes after she was gone, then, in turn, left as well. In the end, only Dallion and one other remained.

Leave us alone, the noble said—the same one that had challenged Dallion for Harp.

My apologies, but that wouldn't be appropriate, Marquis, Taem intervened.

The icy look that Tors gave him was enough to convey everything he was feeling.

Grandmother made it clear, the noble persisted. There won't be any fighting under her roof. Unless you consider verbal fighting fighting?

The young master has yet to learn the intricacies of etiquette and proper behavior.

Just leave. Even favorites can lose their standing.

Ill be fine, Taem, Dallion said, still remaining in his seat. Nothing will happen here. Well be alright.

The subtle use of we was meant as an insult, and it worked at least so much as to have an arrogant smile form on Torss face. This wasnt one of the lowly fake nobles that Dallion had dealt with before. This one had actual power and, should circumstances have been different, was likely going to use it. In many ways, he reminded Dallion of Grym. That one was also eager to destroy Dallion, to the point of obsession. Had he survived Emperor Tamins mass attack, though? Chances were that he had evaporated into a sea of glass.

Of course, sir. Taem bowed, then left the dining hall along with the other servant.

Both nobles remained silent, waiting for the glass doors to shut. Dallion remained at the table, taking a sip of the remaining drinks nearby. As expected, they were something else, made exclusively for the palette of a noble. Anyone with a level beneath seventy would likely find it bland, as for the non-awakened theyd likely mistake it for common water.

Ill save you the time, Dallion said in the most relaxed manner. You think Im scum.

I think the entire line of your grandfather is scum, the other said, adding elements of anger and sadness to his words. The execution was flawless, though the level of his music skills was lacking.

Probably a sixty, Dallion thought.

That had to be a sore point for the marquis. Although his level was well over eighty, he remained subject to local limitations unlike otherworlders. Anyone with a sense of preservation would make note of that and never address it. Dallion, on the other hand, felt confident enough to do the exact opposite.

Cute attempt. He turned to Tors, glass still in his hand in the exact fashion that Ber used to hold it while presenting the city. Already hit your limitation cap? Thats too bad.

Do you know what a marquis is? Tors asked in an icy tone.

Definitely beneath duchess.

You think she cares what happens to you? The only reason you are here is because of a Moon vow!

There was no lie in his words.

That weapon doesnt belong to you. It was supposed to have remained in the House and given to the next in line.

Youre really weak at provoking, you know.

All the emotions coming from Tors suddenly vanished. It wasnt like the void, but rather an absence that indicated presence. Moving the fingers of his left hand, Dallion tried to cast a few spells to see through the layer, but each time he was about to complete the spell, it would fizzle.

Please dont, a deep female voice saidthe buildings guardian.

Sorry. Dallion relaxed his hand. Hes just getting on my nerves.

I keep forgetting youre an amateur, Tors continued in a very different fashion than before. His primal anger had melted away, as had his open hostility. Hunter, mage, soldier Thinking that

because youre like the first emperor, youd amount to anything more than a servant. Great grandma is nice towards you because she has to. All because of the dying request of your grandmother.

Dallion felt anger and longing bubble within him like mentos in a soft drink. He also knew that if he let any of his emotion seep through, the other would win.

I could crush you like a cockroach, Dallion said to himself.

There were no limitations here. And while it was true that the area guardian wouldnt allow for magic, that didnt hold true should Dallion invade his cousins realm.

The duchess wouldnt like it if I harm you, cousin, Dallion said. He knew that he had failed to block all of his emotions, but at this point, it didnt matter.

Thats the first smart thing youve said. Leaving the capital will put our House at a disadvantage during the selection. You know that, but youre reckless enough to try and gain the emperors favor. Dont. The marquis started his way towards the door. I was hoping to have a longer chat, but you ruined the mood. Play your role, pretend youre the hunter thats eager to become an archduke. Just dont play it too well or you wont be the first to be banished to a third-rate city.

That wasnt a threat, it wasnt even a warning; it was an explanation of how things ran. As much as Dallion felt insulted being told the obvious, he knew how things stood. For the moment, he was going to follow the rules and reluctantly play the part given to him.

Tors, Dallion said, just as the marquis had reached the door. My grandmother. What do you know about her?

Who knows? the other replied with an arrogant smirk. Play your role and maybe Ill tell you.

Dallion suspected that wouldnt be the case. Finishing his drink, he placed the glass on the table, followed by the earring. Instantly, he felt the connection to his realm restored.

Did you get any of that? Dallion asked his echoes.

No, Gen said. Im not getting your thoughts even now.

Clearly, anti-magic wasnt the only precaution within the room. There was no point crying over it. Besides, Dallion had memorized everything of importance.

Master Dallion, Taem said from the threshold. We need to be going.

Of course. Just as no one could refuse an invitation, guests couldnt overstay their welcome. The duchess had said what she wanted to, which automatically meant that everyone was free to get back to their lives.

Leaving the palace was a lot less thrilling than entering it. Everything was set up in such a way as to display the power and grandeur of house Elazni, serving as a subtle reminder of what most wouldnt reach.

I suppose theres no point in asking you? Dallion glanced at Taem.

About what, sir?

My grandmother.

Unfortunately, young master, my vow prevents me from discussing the matter without the duchess permission.

Of course it would, Dallion grumbled mentally. While at lower levels, the gates were keeping him from obtaining information. Now that he had the traits, the skills, and the level necessary to know everything, it was a matter of Moon vows. The man didnt seem to be lying, but that made the information all the more difficult. On the bright side, at least there were people who actually knew, and werent just erased by the Order of the Seven Moons.

The crowd near Dallions house had all but vanished. Like everything else in the imperial city, the wonder had lasted a few hours before being overshadowed by something else. In this case, Dallion kept hearing of several other neighborhoods switching to dryad style architecture.

So much for remaining the center of attention, I guess, Dallion said.

You did better than the vast majority, sir. Taem kept on walking. Is there anything you prefer for dinner?

Dinner? I just came from one.

If you would pardon my stating the obvious, sir, but Duchess Elaznis dinner events are not for feasting.

You can say that again. You know me well enough. Surprise me.

I shall make the arrangements at once, sir.

Oh, one more thing. Does the capital have an echo messaging service?

An echo messaging service, sir? The man asked, almost in shock. No, sir. The denizens of the capital dont need to send letters to anyone outside. Its the outsiders that want to come here. I suppose the Order provided a similar service, but as you know, they are unavailable at present.

Is there a rule against using magic?

In the capital? Taem hesitated. Generally, no. I would be cautious, sir. The overseers and the city guards might interpret things in an unflattering fashion, in which case they are sure to intervene.

The message was clear: If Dallion were to use magic to attack anyone of significance, there might be issues. Still, it was better than nothing.

Leaving the butler to procure the food, since even the servants of high standing nobles didnt tend to waste time with cooking, Dallion went to his home. It took a few minutes for him to find a suitable room. All the time, Vihrogon would explain what he had created, as well as the reason for his decision. It was starting to sound like going on a tour with an interior decorator. Finally, Dallion chose to settle down in one of the studies, where he focused on getting information on anything outside of the imperial walls.

It was outright amazing how comfortable people were with living in their bubble. As far as the great majority was concerned, nothing of significance happened out there. There was some gossip: the emperors latest victory, the reshuffling of external nobles and their territories, but on the whole,

internal events were given a lot more importance. To top it off, the emperor wasn't using limiting echoes, as they did in other settlements, but the people had done it to themselves.

Copying the message spell Katka had taught him, Dallion created a cloud message and sent it off. The first, of course, was to Euryale. The tone was highly civil and noble, congratulating another on their shared victory. If all fared well, she'd respond soon enough or possibly even come in person for a visit.

The second message was for Alien. Dallion enjoyed rubbing the archmage's nose, mentioning a whole five times how grateful he and his new House were of the mage's efforts. Naturally, that was followed by a few demands, including a request that all his belongings still at the Academy be transported to his new home, along with Diroh, who technically still remained his apprentice.

Once done, Dallion decided to go all out, sending magic letters to anyone he could think of. Several were sent to people in Nerosal, including a brief message to Hannah letting her know that he and Adzorg were alive and well. Most of his old guild got one as well, and even Cleric was offered a brief report on what was going on.

Only when it came time to write to the general did Dallion hesitate. His new position came with a lot of protections, but even that couldn't do anything against a Moon vow.

Your food is prepared, sir, Taem's voice came from one of the other rooms of the building. One of the advantages of having a high perception trait was that one could hear pretty much everything without the need of people shouting. Additionally, it seems you would be having guests for dinner.

Guests? Dallion wondered. From what he had seen, the people in the capital were anything but neighborly.

Be right there, he said, deciding to send a message to the general, after all.

Now it was time to see who his first guests were.

Chapter 819: Gathering of Leeches

Disappointment came in many shapes and sizes. Dallion had experienced it more often than he would like. That said, this was the first time he was important enough to experience a noble party. There was every reason for a noble to celebrate. At one point, in the distant past, Dallion had thought about it as well. That was before he had acquired his magic trait in a twist of fate. Yet, even then, he didn't expect to be the last person made aware of the sudden celebration or that he'd have to suffer the presence of all the leeches in the city that his house could hold.

What did I tell you? Ber asked, never separating from his glass of alcohol for longer than a few moments. This is one major celebration. It took a lot of effort to organize this.

I bet, Dallion thought.

All of his guests had an awakening level of thirty or less. Some of them didn't even bother to pretend to be important, only there for the free food and gossip. Taem, who diligently stocked the place with food and drink, attempted to introduce all of them, but after the tenth person, Dallion waved his hand for the butler to stop. Even if he could remember everyone's name, family, and appearance perfectly, there was no reason for him to bother. At best they'd be inconsequential, at worst, they were plants by the more powerful members of their families.

Did you do that thing about the guilds I told you? Ber asked.

You only told me a few hours ago, Dallion sighed internally. Apparently, this was his life now: being useless on a major scale. The sad part was that he had to learn how to play it. The surrounding nobles had years, maybe decades, of experience. If he didnt want to stand out, he had to catch on fast. Then again, it was always possible to go another direction.

Say. Dallion discretely cast a silence illusion, encapsulating him and his cousin. You know people, right?

Sensing that he might be asked a favor for once, the leech all of a sudden froze.

I know some people, he said in evasive fashion.

Then you know how to get out of the city?

Why would you want to get out of the city? Theres nothing out there. Just dirt and dust and

I know you have. Dallion bluffed. Even with his music skills, he could sense no indications that Ber had ever set foot outside the walls. However, if there was one thing he was familiar with after working as a hunter, it was spoiled nobles. Its discouraged, so at one point you must have done it. Or know someone who has.

Ber looked around for support. Unfortunately for him, no one in the crowd of people seemed to pay any notice.

You cant only make ripples for so long before they become splashes, the noble said. Take a rest. Have some fun for a change. Suns know you need it.

Was that a yes?

There was a long moment of silence.

No one will know, Dallion said, using his music skill to put some calm in his words. Ive cast a spell to take care of that.

Of course you did. Ber sighed dramatically, then finished his glass. I know someone, but shes not here. Shes a bit out of my league, but I guess that wont be a problem for you. Ill need a few days to set it up.

Days?

Its not like I can just walk up to her. We had a disagreement about something Of course, if you give me a little something, things could move along faster.

Dallion had no doubt that the leech would ask for something. That was what leeches did, after all. Still, there was no deception within the noble, at least none he could clearly sense.

I thought that everyone here had money.

Its not about money. Ber moved closer. Its about history. Youve probably gotten the idea that heirlooms are a big thing around here. You can say they are the true currency after power and he waved his hand whatever those like you do.

Heirlooms were also incredibly powerful. There had already been one scandal regarding Dallions possession of his grandmothers harpsisword. If domain rulers fought about things like that, what chance did Dallion have of getting one to give to one of the less prominent members of his family?

Really? He narrowed his eyes.

Im not asking for the powerful stuff. Ber quickly took a step back. Just a small trinket that will prove that Im in relatively good standing within the House. With one of those I could walk up to my friend and ask. If not, Ill have to spend a few days getting her interested in coming to me. Of course, its your decision.

What exactly do you want?

A ring, the noble said. One of the emblem rings. Theyre said to have belonged to the third emperors brother or the emperor himself, depending on who you believe. Point is that they are considered heirlooms and a mark that their owner is trusted enough to wear them.

I take it you arent.

Well, thats the risk you have to take. Whoever has an heirloom can do whatever they want with it. Thats the definition of it being yours. There have been cases of nobles burning heirlooms just to make a point. Of course, youll need to be strong enough to back that up. Burning stuff belonging to a House might be seen as a challenge.

So, if I give you the ring and you gamble it away

Then Ill become the pariah of the family. The person who owns it gets in trouble, not everyone who gave it to him.

It didnt sound like a difficult task, but most difficult tasks were like that. There was no way that Dallion could go back to the palace and ask for the item tonight. Then again, he could easily do it the following morning. With the role that had been forced onto him, he could afford to be a bit arrogant, and if the item was a trifle, as Ber claimed, there was no reason for the duchess to refuse.

Ill see what I can do. Dallion snapped his fingers.

The noise of the party enveloped them once more. It was as if the rest of the guests suddenly noticed their presence and quickly went back to doing what they did best: ask for favors they knew they wouldnt get.

Dallion spent the next few minutes finding polite ways to refuse. The bonus of having high music skills was that he could do so without being insulting or even rude. Also, it allowed him to train the practical use of his skill a bit. This was very different from getting merchants to offer a better deal. Here, he had to be beyond subtle. These were nobles who were used to having music awakened among them. On the positive side, they were unimportant enough, so were likely to get the hint even if Dallion messed up.

The pattern became instantly clear. Everyone wanted to be seen with him in one place or another, potentially to get invitations to events they otherwise wouldn't.

Maybe next time, he said for the twelfth time in a row. Things had gone so streamlined that neither he nor the people asking for favor wasted time with taking the long approach. It was almost sad, but apparently part of life in the capital. That's why the first deviation he heard made Dallion pay more attention.

When do you want me to take you to my father? a tall woman asked.

She was half a head taller than Dallion himself, with well-formed muscles visible even beneath her clothes. If he couldn't see her awakened level, Dallion might well have assumed she was past the fourth gate. As it stood, though, she was still in the low thirties.

Her clothes were simple compared to everyone else and, more importantly, had no indication as to which family she was part of.

You're quite direct, he said.

Smooth, Vihrogon said within his realm

Me or you? The woman crossed her arms, amused. You came to my house first.

That was even more unexpected. Try as he might, Dallion couldn't remember anything of the sort. Granted, Ber had taken him across most of the city, but he would have remembered chatting up a woman such as this.

Thinking of the leech, the noble was nowhere to be seen. That was unfortunate, since Dallion could have used his help for once. For that matter, Taem also wasn't anywhere nearby, most likely off to get more drinks.

So? The woman seemed instant.

Dallion considered his options. He could refuse and keep on refusing until the early hours of the day, when, hopefully, the leeches would go home. Or he could accept and escape the whole lot of them. After all, having one person keep asking for favors was better than having a houseful of them.

Why not? He nodded. Let's go.

The two walked out of the house, where Dallion was quick to cast an illusion bubble. He had no intention of having others follow behind. The spell had its effect, bringing utter confusion to some people. Their mind rejected the notion that their target had suddenly vanished, then found the only plausible explanation that he was back somewhere inside.

Don't mind them, Dallion said as the two walked along the road by his mansion. Just keep close to the first corner.

Magic? she asked, looking around in an attempt to see the spell itself.

Yes, but don't tell anyone.

At the corner Dallion turned right, getting out of direct view from his house.

Any idea where you're going? the woman asked.

A name would be nice, he responded.

Tonia, Tonia Pilih.

Pilih? Though. That was the family that had supposedly crafted the first emperors sword. With the duel and everything else, Dallion had forgotten all about it. He definitely didnt expect a member of them to go visit him so soon. Apparently, the leech had been right he was an Elazni, so when he wanted a meeting, more often than not people came to him.

My apologies, Lady Pilih. Dallion bowed slightly. I didnt expect you to come to my event.

Looking at you, its a surprise you were invited yourself.

He couldnt help but let out a stifled laugh.

You probably know this already, but a word of warning. Theres no such thing as free favors in the capital. You showed interest in my fathers forge, just as my father has shown interest in your weapons.

Even back in Nerosal, news was quick to spread, but the capital brought it to an entirely new level. In the hours since the two had glanced at each other, Count Pilih had managed to find out pretty much everything there was to know about Dallion and his weapons. No doubt he was interested in the harpsisword, but it seemed that some of Dallions other creations merited some curiosity after all.

Are you fine with that, Harp? Dallion asked.

Its nothing Im not used to, the guardian replied. People were very curious back when I was with your grandmother. Your father was extremely curious. He even tried to forge a copy of me.

Did he succeed?

The nymph didnt answer.

The walk to the Pilihs estate was a lot more pleasant than Dallion expected it to be. Since both he and Tonia knew where they stood, they could spend their time ignoring the usual pretenses and make meaningful small talk.

Theres no harm in flirting a bit, you know, Vihrogon suggested.

I might, Dallion replied, though he clearly had no intention.

The thought made him wonder whether Eury had received his message. No doubt she too had a lot of explaining to do to the powers that be in her alliance. When she got some time, shed respond, though. He was certain of it. Even if she couldnt use magic herself, she could easily get Dark to do it for her.

The entrance to the Pilih estate wasnt one that Dallion remembered. In fact, it wasnt remotely close to the workshop Dallion had visited early that day.

Even without assistance from Adzorg, he could see what was going on. The reality bubble of the realm wasnt as bright as the one he had seen before, squished between others like it in a less

significant part of the city. The family must have held very high esteem once, but throughout the generations had lost a lot of it to the point that only the forge that made the emperors sword was allowed to remain on prime real-estate. The current residence was pushed out to the lesser neighborhoods.

On behalf of my father, welcome, Baron Elazni. Tonia said in a far more formal manner as they reached the outer gate leading to the buildings itself. I wish you both find what you came for.

Chapter 820: The Trophy Room

Four guards in full bronze armor and a servant in velvet and gem-thread clothes greeted Dallion as he entered the building. Many in the empire would describe the family as opulent as any other, but Dallion could see that it had fallen on hard times. It wasnt the clothes, the room, or even the materials used, but rather the lack of people. When visiting Archduke Lanitol, there had been an army of guards and servants in front of the massive palace, not to mention the scores more within. The imperial palace, which prided itself on the small number of people, had hundreds as well, not to mention the thousands of metalins that silently stood about in the role of statues. Here, Dallion hadnt even seen a dozen.

Anything you might want to leave here, sir? the servant asked. He was short, with fiery red hair and enough wrinkles to suggest that he had served the family for over fifty years. His awakening level would normally be considered high for a mercenary, but far less than a domain ruler.

Nothing, thanks, Dallion replied. I dont carry anything with me.

Of course, sir. He turned to the side. This way, if you please. The count is waiting for you in the trophy room.

Good luck, Tonia whispered.

Youre not coming along? Dallion glanced at her.

You and my father have business. I was only tasked with getting you here. Maybe once

Its fine, a deep voice said in the room. Go on, Tonia. Dont disagree with our guest.

Looking at the woman, there didnt seem to be any change. The emotions coming from her, though, abruptly changed. The reserved calm was gone, replaced by a trace of fear and obedience.

Of course, father.

The hallway floor was made entirely of glass. There was a time when Dallion would have been impressed, but now it made him think of the results of the recent war. It was tempting to rely on the emperors superior magic or technology, and yet Dallion still had the same uneasy feeling he couldnt shake off.

Any news from the Azure war? he asked casually.

War, sir? the servant asked, not skipping a beat.

As the family that created many illustrious weapons for the emperor, I thought you might be better aware of external events than me.

Such matters are for the count to discuss, sir. I know far less than either of you.

That was an outright lie. The man was hiding something; he was doing his best to mask the emotional emanations from him, but that only worked to a certain point. Without a doubt, there was some development on the outside, possibly even big ones. Be they a small border skirmish or a new invasion on either side, Dallion had as much chance of learning of them as a cat catching a starfish.

I wouldn't want my efforts to have gone to waste, Dallion went into his role. Especially since there's a chance I'll have to do it again soon.

Again, sir? This time, the servant's head turned a fraction to the side.

Let's just say that I don't plan to remain a baron for long. If the emperor provides me an opportunity, who am I to decline?

The group went up a semi-flight of stairs into a slightly larger room with paintings, though no furniture. Three more corridors went in different directions. The butler continued to the left. The two nobles followed. Less than twenty steps away, a large hand-carved door of dark oak creaked open.

Dallion could see the magic threads that made that possible, but even he had to admit how elegantly they were placed. Whichever mage had created the enchantment was a good craftsman, thinking of mages as well as ordinary awakened.

Baron Elazni, sir. The butler stood to the side the moment he entered the room.

Now this was a real room, large and filled to the ceiling with weapons. They were of various shapes and sizes, some on the walls, others on racks or stands throughout the room. When the servant had told Dallion that he was expected in the trophy room, this wasn't what he expected; nor had he expected roughly a quarter of the weapons to have void threads coming out of them.

What do you think? The count asked, standing next to a two-handed sword that extended five feet in length and at least one in width.

Count? Dallion asked, more concerned with the void weapons than the purpose of the question.

Masterpieces from across the empire, the noble continued. Up close, he looked a bit different from what Dallion remembered him taller, bulkier, with a strong sense of dedication and conviction emanating from him.

Does he know? Dallion asked in his personal realm.

It's impossible to tell, Vihrogon replied. We weren't freely in touch. If I still had the void connection, I'd be able to talk to them, but

Any chance that they might know you?

Definitely. The void doesn't like losing things. They might know all about you as well, although seeing how careless they are, maybe not. Or maybe they think they're better than I was. That's one of the shortcomings of being affected by it you gain a little bit of power, but a whole lot of confidence.

Mentally, Dallion nodded. He had seen it many times when dealing with cultists. Every single one of them believed they had been destined for greatness, superior to everyone else, including other cultists.

Did your family craft them? Dallion asked.

Some. The count polished part of the blade in front of him. In contrast to everything in the room, he was wearing dull gray clothes, although even they probably cost as much as a neighborhood in Nerosal. Most have been bought or bartered. Im sad to say that there are truly few admirers of real beauty in the empire. Even the emperor, despite his many skills and power, has little interest.

The man took a step back, then glanced at everyone present in turn.

Wyvern brandy, Leon, the count ordered.

At once, sir. The servant bowed. Anything for you, Baron?

Not for the moment, thanks.

My lady? the man turned to Tonia.

Diamond water.

Of course, my lady. The man bowed again, then left the room, closing the door behind him.

I heard you fancy yourself a craftsman, the count continued. That remains to be seen, but theres no doubt that youre a connoisseur. The weapon you were given is beyond a work of art.

The harpsisword, I assume?

The same. Did you know that its actually unique?

I have been told that a few times. Dallion couldnt help himself.

That has nothing to do with the second empress. When it came to forging, neither she, nor the emperor at the time, were particularly gifted. Skilled, definitely. One doesnt become emperor lacking skills, but he was nowhere near a master.

That was a bit brazen, even for a count. No wonder his family had lost its influence. It was a miracle that the man had survived at all. Criticizing an emperor past or present wasnt the best of ideas, and Count Pili had done both in a span of minutes.

The real marvel was that the weapon was created by the dryad guardian herself.

Despite all his training, Dallion felt his pulse jump. Harp had created herself. That sounded a bit too metaphysical to be true, although there were a few ways in which it could be done. Using magic, or a powerful enough magic item, it wouldnt be impossible for someone to summon her from the banished realms. Alternatively, she could have come on her own volition back when the harpsisword was nothing but a rod of red-hot metal.

Show me, the count said.

Without hesitation, Dallion cast a spell summoning his weapon. The moment the harpsisword appeared, the nobles eyes lit up. One didnt need to have music skills to tell how much he wanted to own it, and at the same time was also afraid of touching it.

A weapon forged out of sound itself The count took a step forward, bending forward so as to admire the craftsmanship of the weapon up close. Or so some of the stories go. A few of my ancestors tried

copying the design and method, but none of the guardians could pull it off. He took a step back. Now, show me your other weapons.

The next weapon Dallion summoned was his hammer. The item got a fair bit of attention, though not nearly as much as the harpsisword.

Smart for a tool, Count Pili said. Plenty of functionality, but not that much style.

Dallion could hear Onda grumble within the hammers realm.

What about your illusion blade? I heard it was an illusion blade with a rather unique guardian.

A shardfly guardian, Dallion said. Sadly, it was shattered in the wilderness. Actually, that was the reason I became so interested in your forge.

Youre planning on making a new one?

I have the blueprint. Everything beyond that is skill and patience.

And adequate materials, the count corrected. Unless youll be content with sky silver or something even less refined.

I suppose Ill have to gather some funds.

The count laughed. It wasnt a rude laugh, but that of one who had witnessed naivete in a pool of cynicism.

Wealth isnt needed here. We are wealth. Good materials remain rare. As an imperial you might be able to get a bit more, but not that much. Not unless you trade favors. Show me your other weapons.

Dallion summoned his bladebow.

You made this? the noble looked at the weapon critically.

Back when I was still learning.

Craftsmanship isnt bad, but rushed. Interesting touch with the kaleidervisto, but ultimately useless for such a weapon. There are a lot more options than what you have done.

And what favors would be required to gain your wisdom and forge for a day or two?

A magic masterpiece. The response was immediate. Its claimed youre a mage. Make a masterpiece based on my specifications with magic, and Ill let you make use of my forge.

There was a time when Dallion would have been overjoyed at such a proposal. Unfortunately, he was in the capital now, and his victory seemed too fast. The count hadnt argued one bit, which made him suspect there was something else at play.

I think he might need some time to consider, father, Tonia said, diplomatically. Hes been in the capital for less than a day.

That should be enough for him to make up his mind, the man humphed.

Its alright. Ill make your masterpiece. That was a good excuse for him to attempt some advanced forging. When he was a simple mage, Harp had been reluctant to let Onda teach him the really advanced forging methods as a domain ruler, though she could no longer use that excuse. Might I ask a few things about your collection before that? Dallion made his way to a pair of daggers from which several strands of void came out, extending beyond the walls of the room. Where did you get these?

The Sunset Daggers? My grandfather got them from an archduke in exchange for creating a set of armor for his son-in-law. Im not even sure which one. Do you fancy them?

I might.

Make a suitable replacement and Ill give them to you.

You have yourself a deal, Count. Dallion extended his hand out of habit.

A moment of awkwardness followed. Nobles didnt shake hands. Words were their bond, and if that failed Moon vows. Hand shaking was meant for lesser awakened. After all, physical contact could lead to realm invasions.

Thankfully, Count Pilih quickly put an end to Dallions faux pas by shaking his hand in return. The action was as brief as possible, but kept Dallion from openly losing face. Clearly the noble wanted a magic weapon quite badly.

You also mentioned you were interested in news about the war. The man pulled back his hand, moving it behind his back.

Just idle curiosity, count.

Its fortunate, then, that I have a guest that could satisfy your curiosity.

On cue, the door opened. Dallion expected it to be the servant arriving with their refreshments. Instead, it was someone who he never expected to see here, of all places.

Hello, Dal. A woman wearing a full set of heavy armor entered. Nice to see youve risen up in the world.

Hi, March. Dallion felt a lump form in the back of his throat. Its been a while.