

Leveling up 861

Chapter 861: Rule Breaker

Sleep powder kept on raining from the sky. Even with Gleams best attempts, the amount was far too small to prove any hindrance for Hannah. What the innkeeper couldnt avoid, she dispersed with one strike in Gleams direction, additionally causing the spectral shardfly to go on the defensive. That was only part of Dallions plan, though.

ATTACK NEGATED

Youve shattered HANNAHs line attack.

Attack has no effect.

Another red rectangle emerged in the air. With the roles reversed, Hannah had become the attacker, while Dallion had gone on the defensive. Even his music chords had changed from attack to defense, combining with spellcraft to create rows of magical barriers between him and the innkeeper. But as soon as they appeared they were reduced to colored fragments by one attack or another. The speed was so great that the barrier pieces created the impression they were flashes of light blinking around him.

Just like at a party, Dallion thought.

A party Maybe because of the music, but there was something very familiar about this. The party, the drinking, the college dorm. Ages ago, in another life, he had gone to a party very much like this one. There had been lights, music He remembered looking forward to the next dayhis first day of college and the step into a new world. And there was

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

What are you doing?! Gleam shouted, using the power of her wings to create a wall between him and Hannah. It was only an illusion, but enough to help him regain his concentration.

Immediately, Dallion switched his hold on the haprsisword, deflecting several more attacks. Thankfully, no more damage was suffered.

Whats with you? The shardfly flew closer, ready to shield his back with her wings.

Sorry, I lost my concentration for a moment, he lied.

Against her? At the worst possible time!

Im fine. Dallion gritted his teeth. For a moment, he tried to focus back on the memory, but it had already fled. Regardless, he still had a fight to win.

Dallion burst into instances. The health hed lost was significant, but not enough to bring defeat. He just had to be careful to see it through. Running the plan in his mind, there was a one in three chance that hed succeednot great, everything considered, but better than the alternatives.

Lux, hit her with a healing bolt! Dallion ordered.

The firebird took the form of a bladebow and fired a dozen bolts at Hannah. None of them passed remotely close, but that wasnt Dallions goal.

Gleam, cover me with sleep dust! he shouted, drawing several symbols for sleeplessness on his skin.

Hannahs attacks abruptly stopped. Knowing the effects that the illusion dust would have, she paused a few moments to consider a new approach. Dallion took advantage of the situation to surround himself with an impressive number of aether barriers and bubbles.

Clever, Hannah said. Surround the sleep dust with barriers so that I cant slash it away.

I aim to please. He cast a quick spell to improve his stamina.

It wont work. Ill just do several attacks in rapid succession.

Even youll get tired of line attacks, Dallion said.

Thats the hill you want to die on?

Dallion smiled. I dont know if Ive told you, but Im greedy. I came here to get the best people and pieces for my settlement, and Im not leaving without them.

Always the same boy. Big words, but are you ready for the consequences?

Or succeeding? At this point, everything I do has consequences, so I might as well succeed.

Gem, I want you to be ready, Dallion said mentally to his aetherfish familiar. A lot will depend on you.

Err, yes, boss, the creature replied from his realm, utterly surprised. Isnt big bro Lux enough?

Hes doing something different. Just be ready to do what I tell you without thinking or asking questions.

Barely had Dallion thought that than Hannah leaped through the air, heading straight at him. Four blades split the air, sending enough line attacks to transform a mountain chain into a valley. Faced with that, Dallions aether defenses popped like water bubbles. Gleams dust made a futile attempt to fill the opened area, only to be swept away.

Releasing all his gear, Dallion summoned his aura blade in an attempt to match Hannahs number of strike attacks.

ATTACK NEGATED

Youve shattered HANNAHs line attack.

Attack has no effect.

Clusters of red rectangles filled the air as the distance between the two diminished. The sword allowed Dallion to cast more barrier spells as he performed each strike, but even that didnt seem capable of stopping the attack. The dust of their fading remains was so intense that it resembled a purple mist.

Stay back! Gleam closed all her sets of wings round Dallion, hardening them to the point of diamonds.

Hannah was less than fifty feet away, ready to perform her final blow.

Gem, get out and amplify all magic! Dallion ordered.

Emerging from his head, the aether jellyfish expanded, glowing in a bright purple light. All dust and aether particles in the area ignited, though not fast enough to prevent Hannahs strike.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 50%

The force of the attack passed through all remaining defensesincluding Gleams indestructible wingsslamming into Dallions chest. In spite of the pain, Dallion couldnt deny that only a master could achieve such a feat. There was no armor that could stop this, rather the armor would remain unscratched, but the attack would simply ignore it.

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PERMANENT EFFECT - SLEEP

HANNAH has been affected by sleep and will be out of commission for the next hour.

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

As Gleam opened her wings, both Dallion and Hannah fell to their knees.

How? she asked, struggling to remain awake through will alone.

Misdirection, Dallion coughed, fighting the pain. I added sleep to my barriers. With Gems amplification, they hit a lot harder.

Should have seen it

I hoped you wouldnt.

I should have drained your health with that last attack Hannah fell to the ground.

You did. Dallion said, Luxs blue flames surrounding him. Im out of health, but magic is the trait of exceptions. Ill be out of your realm in a bit, but not before

HANNAHs destiny has been unsealed.

Not before that, Dallion managed to say.

His vision was blurry as he felt all the strength leave him. Maintaining an existence with magic alone was no simple thing. No wonder that only magic entities used it. Even with all his planning, he had barely managed to prolong his stay in Hannahs realm by a few seconds.

RULE BREAKER

(+5 Body, +5 Magic)

You really shouldnt be getting this. Pull something else stupid one more time and youll lose a lot more.

Yeah. Dallion made an attempt to laugh. I thought youd say that. He lost consciousness.

When he regained it again, he was back in the inns kitchen, surrounded by piles of food. His first thought was that he was dreaming. Slowly lifting his head, Dallion looked around expecting to see Felygn or some other Moon. Instead, he saw Pan and Hannah. Clearly, permanent effects were a lot less permanent when she was concerned.

How long Dallion began, but quickly stopped. Based on the food prepared, he could assume that it had been at least a few hours, if not half a day.

Ignoring the painful thumping in his head, he stretched, cracked his neck, then used his aether vision on Hannah. Along with her many skills, her awakening level was displayed as eighty-five.

There it is, the innkeeper said in her usual harsh voice. The smugness of a lucky idiot.

You have to give him some credit. Pan shoved a doughnut-like sandwich in Dallions hands. He did manage to beat you.

Unsure what to say, Dallion took a bite. The food was even more magnificent than he remembered it.

I was this close to taking the form of the Green Moon, Pan told Dallion. I even had a whole speech ready and everything. Hannah took pity on you.

I just didnt want him to freak out in my kitchen. She crossed her arms.

Youre joining me, Dallion said between bites. Both of you.

After everything you did, its difficult not to. Part of the copyette turned into a chair on which his human part sat. The way things are going, I would have taken one side or another. Better yours.

I thought youd stay with the Order.

Im not part of the Order, the copyette hissed. The whole reason I escaped my prison was so I never would be.

The amount of anger and hatred emanating from Pan almost made Dallion shiver. This wasnt said on a whim. There was something deep-rooted here going back centuries. Maybe this was a good time to remind everyone that the Order of the Seven Moons and Dallion were working together? Or better not. The copyette probably knew, plus Dallion was doing things with them, not for them.

So, its finally come to that, Pan said with a sigh. Conquering the world.

Or stopping someone else from doing it, Dallion said, half convinced. Any insight you could give me?

The only advice I can give anyone trying to take over the world: dont. Pan laughed. I know, not what you wanted to hear, but these things never end well. Its no coincidence that no one who tried to conquer the world ever succeeded.

Wasnt that because of the Star? Hes gone for the moment, and so has the

I cant tell you more without telling it all, and if I do that, all of us will be in trouble. Do what you think you should do. Hannah and I will back you all the way.

All the way? Dallion arched a brow. That sounds a bit He wanted to say suspicious, but settled on another word. Extreme.

If you mess up, all of us are getting banished whether we were with you or not, Hannah said. This way, at least we get to choose. She took a piece of meat from one of the many plates on the table. In other words, your bribe worked.

One things for sure, the copyette added. Youll need to grow a lot and fast. What do you have so far?

You, Adzorg, Diroh, the Icepickers. Dallion took another bite. I think Ill convince most of the local furies, maybe a few more from outside. Do you want me to take the arena ruins with me?

The answer didnt come right away. Internal conflict emanated from Pan. The whole of Nerosal was built on top of the former copyette capital. Ages ago, this was considered the center of the world, not a backwater city where the banished were sent off to.

Leave it here, the copyette said. Maybe its time will come in a future age. Anyone else?

Ill try to get the hunters. I can still get in touch with a few of them. Before entering the Academy, Dallion had hired a veteran hunter to track down Euryale. The man had given him an echo ring for them to be in touch, but that was pretty much the last they had talked. The fault was just as much Dallions as it was the hunters. After all, he hadnt called to check on him once.

Youre making the same mistake I didrelying on quality when you should focus on quantity.

At the moment, Im trying to focus on both.

Just some friendly advice. The copyette stood up, the chair sinking into the floor beneath him. This is your try. Im only here to watch and assist.

Someones waiting to see you, the guardian of the inn told Dallion all of a sudden. The fact that it had chosen to interrupt suggested that it had to be more than a visit from an acquaintance.

Where? Dallion asked. The dozens of hiding spells on the walls, and complete lack of windows, made it impossible for anyone to see in or out of the kitchen, even with magic. Due to his circumstances, Pan treasured his privacy.

Outside in the street, the inn replied. Theres a lot of them.

Chapter 862: Allies through Necessity

When it came to awakened, the definition between an army and a crowd was a lot more subtle than one might think. A group of fifteen people had gathered in front of the Gremlins Timepiece, waiting patiently for Dallion to come outside. All of them could be defined as mid-level; all of them had multiple disfocus rings on. Along with the other artifacts they were wearing, this group was enough to take control of a mid-sized town, or even cause serious disruptions within a city, should they be inclined to do so.

On the other side of the inn door stood half a guild of competent awakened as well. While most of them lacked in level, a few made up for it. And of course, there were Hannah and Dallion. Domain rulers in their own right, the pair could be considered the strongest entities within the city, assuming the Order of the Seven Moons hadn't secretly brought in any of their big guns.

Casting a subtle aether armor spell, Dallion opened the door and stepped outside.

Well met, your grace. The man in front bowed. A pleasure to see you again.

Is it really? Dallion asked. Thanks to his aether vision, he could see through the effects of the disfocus items, looking at the face behind the illusion. You thought differently last time, Belaal.

That was back when you were weak, the man said unapologetically, removing the disfocus ring. Despite our differences, the Mirror has always acknowledged strength. We serve the hand that holds the sword.

Rather, you're the first to run off a sinking ship, Dallion thought.

The past is the past, Belaal continued. What's important is that we're here with an offer for you.

Please, do tell. Dallion crossed his arms.

I heard that you offered any fury in Nerosal to become part of your domain.

That was hardly surprising. Criminal organizations were always the first to hear things. Even so, Dallion was impressed at the speed they had managed to do so. His conversation with the lord mayor was a few hours ago. Originally, Dallion intended to spread the news right after convincing Hannah. Somehow, they had saved him the effort.

It's true, he confirmed.

I'll cut to the point. I speak for the prince when I say that the Mirror Pool is offering its services and will be glad to join your new endeavor.

The offer hardly counted as a surprise, considering everything else Dallion had gone through over the last year, but it did cause him to raise an eyebrow.

You want to join my city? he asked. After everything you did?

I admit mistakes were made, but you know our capabilities better than most. And not to forget, we are willing to swear loyalty to you. Belaal narrowed his eyes. A full Moon vow.

Any normal person would have asked about the catch. After spending some time in the imperial capital, Dallion could spot it right away. The Mirror Pool itself was the catch. When word went out that he had accepted part of the awakened underworld, many would think twice before joining his settlements.

Do you take him for an idiot? Hannah asked, joining Dallion outside. No way anyone would agree to that.

Thats not your business, Hannah. Belaal hissed. This is between me and

Shut your mouth or youll be going on expeditions to mend your teeth for the next hundred years. The innkeeper didnt let him finish. She wasnt one to stay quiet before, and definitely wasnt going to take that with her awakened powers fully restored.

Let it go, Dallion whispered.

Why? Because he said a few polite words to tickle your ego?

Because hes serious enough to get the whole Mirror here. Not just this group, but everyone else in the street.

As he said that, all the ordinary passers-by suddenly stopped. There were close to a hundred of them all together. The vast majority were awakened, although there were a few ordinary people scattered about.

Your skills have improved a lot, your grace, Belaal had to admit. Either that, or our trinkets arent as good as they were supposed to be.

Only members of the Mirror Pool would calmly pass by this scene without showing any emotions. Were you hoping to take me on should I refuse?

No.

There was no lie in the mans words. What was more, Dallion sensed a note of desperation. The organization was probably asking itself the same questions that any other awakened was at present: how would the war affect them? With the clashes between powers increasing, it was only a matter of time before everyone with a bit of strength was forced to choose a side. The sooner that was done, the more options one would have. Those that waited till the end would be forced to take whatever was left.

We need you more than you need us, but are you in a position to refuse? Belaal had no intention of giving up. And by we, Im referring to the Pools of most large cities, not just Nerosal.

You have the authority to decide for them?

It has been indicated to me that should we be successful, certain other princes would be open to following suit. Very open to it, in fact.

A perfect opportunity, dear boy, Adzorg said. Accept now, purge them later.

Adzorg Dallion mentally sighed.

Think of it this way. Do you prefer to know what they are up to, or have them join someone else and keep guessing?

The old mages reasoning wasnt bad, but Dallion felt it wasnt enough. Accepting would give him an immediate boost. Hed have hundreds, possibly even thousands of skilled awakened become part of Sandstorm. On the other hand, he couldnt be sure when the next group of people would dare join;

likely not before he had made a second settlement. Was that a bad thing, though? The decision would force him to commit to increasing his domain.

A town of outcasts, hunters, furies, and criminals Dallion thought.

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You dont have to liklle it, Belaal said. Just be practical.

The last person who had said something along those lines had been the general. Of course, back then Dallion held no power, unlike now. And still could he really forgive them? After what they did to him? After what they did to Gloria? Giving a second chance was all well and good when theory was concerned, but when he was involved, things were different.

Its your decision, of course, Adzorg said. But can you honestly say that I was any different from them?

All eyes were on Dallion. Depending on what he did, this might end up being one of the greatest mistakes in his life. Time seemed to slow down, as he considered all potential outcomes he could think of.

Fine, he said at last. All that join have to vow. You should be prepared to do that at least.

The tension that had filled the air quickly dissipated. There was no telling whether that was the right choice, but Dallion had made it. Now he and everyone else was going to have to live with it. Vows quickly followed, starting with Belaal. For over half an hour, members offered their fealty and, with that, becoming his subjects. By the time it was over seven hundred and eleven citizens of Sandstorm had emergedmuch more than Dallion expected.

If there was one thing the Mirror Pool excelled in, it was speed and efficiency. Hardly had the process finished than Dallion was given a list of buildings to take with him. Without exception, they were structures that Nerosal wouldnt miss and upon seeing their state, Dallion could understand why. All requests were quickly denied, although he did instruct the Mirror Pool to move all of their belongings to the arena. Additionally, he gave them the task of recruiting the local furies. The latter turned out a lot easier than expected; most members of the race were already involved with the Pool in some form or other. Those that werent, quickly joined on their own accord. Having a fury princess already part of Dallions domain tended to have that effect.

By nightfall, everyone that was supposed to leave for Dallions settlement had gathered at the arena or in Hannahs inn. All final preparations had been made, and even the Order had given their blessing without any fuss. All that remained was for the actual move to take place.

Dallion stood in the top room of the Gremlins Timepiece, looking out of the window at the night sky. A while back, this used to be his roomthe place that he got to develop his abilities. He knew every single of the item and area guardians there from the furniture to the boards on the floor.

Afraid that you made the wrong choice? Hannah appeared next to him.

Dallion gave the woman a quick glance, then looked back out of the window.

Doesnt she get upset when you use her form? he asked.

No. Im the only person she can rely on to keep her sane. The womans form morphed into that of Pan. Her curse was linked to otherworlders, but thats not the whole thing. If she remains far from an otherworlder for long, the void might consume her.

What? She didnt

Tell you that? The copyette interrupted. Would you have stayed if she had?

There was a moment of silence.

Let me end the suspense. No, you wouldnt have. No normal otherworlder would. The thing about us is that were like water, always flowing towards something. When we face a barrier, we stop and build up, creating the impression that weve settled down, but its only temporary.

Except you?

You can say that. Pan looked out of the window. Magnificent, arent they? Seven glowing orbs of power in the sky. Ever so beautiful and merciless. The truth is that I cant return, not after what I pulled. I tried conquering the world once, and it didnt work out, so all thats left for me is to seek out some calm and quiet.

Calm and quiet didnt sound like the copyettes first choice. Thinking back, it reminded Dallion of a copying mechanism, exactly like Havoc, Aspion, his grandfather They too had chosen the calm life, and each time as a result of massive failure.

Is that why you joined me? Because of her?

Maybe in part. Im more like the Mirror Pool, to be honest. Choose or be chosen. Were in the endgame war. Ive been through one already, so I know how to recognize the signs. Maybe it wont happen right away. It might even be decades off, but things are in motion.

Things were in motion and depending on the outcome, Dallion might end up in the same position Pan was in right now. With the skills, abilities, and companions he had gathered, maybe he too would manage to escape the banished realms and spend the rest of his existence hiding in a world without humans. Or maybe the next Order of the Seven Stars would summon him to act as their eyes and ears?

Your choice was a choice. Only you can decide whether to forgive the Mirror Pool, but you can definitely make use of them until the time you make that choice.

Are those the words of wisdom from the ages? Dallion cracked a smile.

Thats what I get for trying to be supportive. The copyette chuckled. So you know how to move domains?

Ive done it once before.

Good. Ill be able to give you some advice. The most common mistake is trying to rush. Stay calm and everything will be alright.

And if its not, Ill deal with it.

See? Youre learning, already. Pan gave Dallion a pat on the back. Youll still need to find more people, though. Remember what I told you about quantity and quality?

Dallion nodded. The conversation was only half a day ago, but with everything that had taken place, it already seemed months back.

Anything else I should know?

Eye on front and never trust a weatherman, the copyette said, adding some humor from his own world.

Ill try to remember that. Dallion took a deep breath, then pulled Hannahs inn and the arena out of Nerosals domain. The second move to Sandstorm had just begun.

Chapter 863: Sandstorm Quarters

ARENA has been added to the land of Sandstorm.

The blue rectangle emerged in front of Dallion.

SANDSTORM has acquired 16734 inhabitants.

SANDSTORM can be improved to Level 5.

The massive arena popped up in the center of the settlement. The number of inhabitants was impressive, even if the vast majority of them were furies. Belaalwho surprisingly enough, turned out not to be the Mirror Pools princeclaimed that thousands of more members were on the way. Dallion was highly doubtful, but even if that were the case, they would remain well short of the furies.

Forging a province is never easy, Dallion said to himself.

It had been ten minutes since hed had a semi-functioning village and already he could see some obvious problems. Everything had seemed so much easier in Nerosal. Since everyone came from the same city, and owed him a debt of gratitude, Dallion assumed theyd get along with each other easily. How wrong could one get?

The plan had always been for the furies to get the arena building, while Dallion used his skills to create homes for the Mirror Pool. Yet, that had proved not to be enough. Despite acknowledging that they were part of the same settlement, both groups had requested to be as far away from the other as possible. That went against every principle Dallion thought he knew. Logically, the closer the major elements of a town were, the more efficient it would be. Clearly, that didnt take personal preferences into account. Normally, villages would take generations to develop, which was also the reason for the vast inefficiencies Dallion had frequently noticed. In his case, this was more a gathering of outcasts, none of which particularly trusted the rest. Or, as Adzorg had put it, an interesting challenge.

Not bad. Hannah approached Dallion. Will need a heck of a lot of work, though.

Tell me about it. Yeah, Dallion sighed. And Ive yet to start inviting hunters.

Theyll accept. The womans confidence was to be envied. Youre offering what theyve always lacked: a home.

The same could be said for each of the other groups. Having them all at the same place, though, was like mixing three groups of volatile elementsif he stopped paying attention, there was every chance that everything would go up in smoke.

If youre having trouble running a village, how will you run an empire? Vihrogon asked.

Tactful as ever, Dallion sighed.

Just my way of telling you to relax a bit. In this place, you have all the power. If you want, you can even raise walls between the groups, creating isolated quarters.

That sounded like a terrible idea, even if undoubtedly functional.

What did you do with your domain?

Dallion asked the dryad.

I dumped it on the first person I could find. Vihrogon laughed. Joy by far wasnt the only emotion that emanated from him as he did. Of course, I joined the imperial army soon after. Besides, all my inhabitants were dryads.

A crowd of furies had already flocked around Dirohs inn. Many knew her back from the time she was in Nerosal, aware that she was heir to the fury throne. It wouldnt be long before theyd start treating her as such.

Youll have to keep an eye on that, Hannah said, looking in the same direction. The empire destroyed one alliance of furies. They wont hesitate if there were a second.

Dill be able to handle things.

Maybe, but can you guarantee the rest wont cause issues?

Dallion considered his options.

Im not building this place on limiting echoes, he said in a firm tone.

No one takes control of a settlement wanting to use limiting echoes, but we dont always get what we want. And what about them?

The woman turned in the direction of the new cluster of houses by the west gate. That was also a new addition, created by Diroh along with Gleam and Skye in Dallions absence. It was telling that the trio already considered Sandstorm their home, though the same couldnt be said about the Mirror Pool. Their request to be close to a town exit was showing.

Can you handle them? Dallion asked Hannah. Just for the time being.

The guild and now half your town. Anything else youd like?

Luck, Dallion whispered. Lots and lots of luck.

Shaking her head, the woman gave Dallion a pat on the shoulder, then walked away. Some things were better left unsaid.

Dallion spent the next few minutes standing there, looking at everything and nothing in particular. Hed been a domain ruler for months now, yet seeing his settlement actually take shape felt like losing his virginitypleasant, strange, and very confusing. Still, there was no time to dwell on matters. Once the few minutes were over, Dallion went back to work.

The first thing he did was enter Sandstorms realm again and face the area guardian. The fights were just as fast as before, allowing him to raise the settlement level to six. As it turned out, from the town level onwards, every improvement came with firm requirements. Inhabitants seemed to be the only limiting factor, but as Dallion knew, in order to get and keep inhabitants here, a lot of additional structures had to be built. Also, people werent the only ones that had to be kept happy.

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For over a day, Dallion ventured through the realm hunting cracklings. In the process, he took special care to talk to all the guardians in his realm. It wouldnt be long until some of them grew into key guardians of the domain. The rules on this still remained a bit unclear, though the assumptions were that the most significant structures would eventually take on the role.

Finished with his caretaker duties, Dallion then proceeded to reorganize the settlement a bit. Keeping the circular form, he extended the walls outwards, then divided the town into five separate districts. The fields tended by the rune golem became the southern district, responsible for food production. Using a bit of magic, and a lot of shaping, Dallion made an irrigation and canal system to ensure an optimal growth. He was even tempted to scatter a few growth and vitality magic symbols about, but Adzorg warned against the idea. Although magic was the trait of exceptions, it had a tendency not to follow common logic. Thus, while it would allow crops to grow dozens of times faster, their nutrient value would remain negligible. Nobles tended to use the practice to boast beautiful gardens which remained only for show.

The western and eastern areas Dallion designated as living quarters. For the moment, only the western one was occupied, but once hunters started to flow to it, that would change. In addition to common houses, Dallion also added a few artisan workshops, a few taverns, and, above all proper plumbing. In time more would be added, based on the peoples requests, but for the moment it was better to start simple.

In the center, Dallion kept the arena, which would serve as the furies home, as well as the seat of power. For that precise reason, he moved Dirohs inn to the center of the field. Being a mages apprentice, she had the skill to change it into anything she desired. And should she have issues, Gleam would gladly leave a hand.

The final sector remained empty for the most part. There, Dallion placed the Gremlins Timepiece along with a few warehouses to contain the items hed gotten from Canopa.

Finally done, Dallion thought, returning to the real world.

People kept on moving about, examining the buildings as they chose which one would be their home. For now, no one was particularly picky, but as space diminished that, too, would change.

Pretty scary, isnt it? Pan said, taking on the appearance of a trader Dallion once knew. How they move about focused on their everyday worries, never noticing the changes that took place.

What do you mean?

As far as theyre concerned Sandstorm has always been like this. Well, they know that you brought the arena from Nerosal, that you created the

buildings that they'll live in, but all the changes you've done in the last week will remain completely ignored.

As if to confirm, Dallion split into instances. The copyette was right. In all the conversations, no one mentioned the change. What was more, a few were considering choosing a house near the taverns, claiming they'd had their eye on them since arriving.

Dont worry, its normal, Pan said before Dallion could ask.

That didn't happen before.

Everyone who is part of the city only notices if the ruler wants them to. Back when you used to be a hunter, didn't you notice how different the city was each time you returned?

Dallion wanted to say that there had been reasons for that. With all the events taking place, it was natural that the city would go through changes: the Stars attack, the phoenix hunt, the poison plague, even the few skirmishes with neighboring countries back in the day. Was that the real reason, though?

Just as Dallion was about to ask how often, a spark of fear flickered through his realm.

Dal, things are bad! Gleams voice came from his personal realm.

Dallions immediate reaction was to look around, but there was no sight of her. Wherever the shardfly was, it had to be a significant distance away.

What happened? He cast a flight spell and moved up to get a better view.

Water golems! Theres a pack of them

Make a light beacon! Dallion interrupted. Pan. He looked down. Hannah has the town. Tell her to prepare for an attack.

How bad is it? The copyette asked, but Dallion had already flown off.

Gear and pieces of aether armor covered Dallion as he summoned his weapons, simultaneously casting a dozen protective spells. The possibility of being attacked was in his mind ever since he saw the first water golem, but this was far too soon. Unlike the Tamin Empire, The Azures weren't slacking. The loss of Canopa must have urged a response and quite a massive one.

A thread of light appeared in the distance, marking the exact spot of Gleams encounter. It was on the other side of the mountains, which meant that the enemy didn't know the location of Sandstorm yet.

I saw it, Dallion told his familiar. Are they only water golems?

Isn't that enough for you? The thread of light abruptly disappeared. I like a good hunt like anyone else, but not against this many!

Gritting his teeth, Dallion started casting the most destructive spell he knew. By his estimates, it was going to take him about ten minutes to reach Gleam more than enough time to finish the spell, but was she going to prove capable of surviving that long?

Gleam, when I tell you I want you to get out of there, Dallion ordered. Head straight up to the sky, as quickly as you can.

You're going to do something crazy, right? The joy emanating from her voice was chilling.

Nothing I haven't done before.

Technically, Dallion was right. He'd cast the ray of destruction several times before, though in most cases it was after he'd consumed a Moonstone. Other than the forbidden spells Adzorg had showed him, this was the only one that Dallion found too dangerous to place in a clay cylinder. The slightest miscalculation was enough for it to hit the wrong target, causing by far more harm than good.

Splitting into instances, Dallion took advantage of his massive speed to grab a clay cylinder from his belt and break it, all the time without interrupting his spell casting. An aether echo of him popped into existence.

Stay here and make sure nothing goes through, he ordered.

I know. The echo smiled, starting its own series of spells. You don't need to tell me.

Gleam, Dallion focused on the task at hand. Can you get them in one spot?

You're joking, right? It'll be impossible for me to separate them. The pesky puddles have merged into one big thing.

Okay!

That was good.

Keep them like that. When I fly over the mountain, you fly up and I'll fry all of them at once. Whatever's left, we finish off later.

Err, there might be a slight problem with that. The shardfly didn't sound at all confident. There's more than water golems now.

Damn it! What else is there?

Nymphs

Chapter 864: Stone Circle and Water Islands

The word sent shivers down Dallion's spine. He knew that at some point he'd have to face them, but this was far too soon. He had only started building up his domain. A major encounter with a world power would quickly see all his efforts snuffed away. At best, he'd have to retreat back into the imperial capital. At worst, he wouldn't have a chance to.

How many? Dallion asked.

A small island, the spectral shardfly replied. A few islands.

Dallion suspected that island didn't have the meaning he was used to. Right now, that was irrelevant. Facing several groups of nymphs changed his calculations. No longer could he afford to fly over the mountain.

Gleam, use all the illusions you can and keep them occupied, Dallion ordered. Gem, I need you here.

No sooner had he given the order than a purple jellyfish popped into existence.

Yes, boss. Its aether form vibrated, forming words.

Wrap around me! I want you to amplify my spell as much as you can.

Wrap, boss? the aetherfish asked, confusion emanating from it.

Like Lux does.

Ah, boss Lux.

Without a second thought, the aetherfish flew onto Dallion. Its large form surrounded him, like a giant piece of aether armor. Of all familiars, this one was the only one that remained low level. Vast amounts of magic threads were necessary for its growth, causing Dallion to leave it for later. Now, he regretted his decision.

Seconds crept on. Gems presence had increased the speed of Dallions flight spell, making him move faster in Gleams direction. Even so, it would be at least five minutes for Dallion to get therefar too long.

Adzorg, what was the portal trick furies used to move clouds faster? he asked, on the verge of completing his modified ray spell.

Very dangerous, the old mage replied. You need a clear sky, nothing blocking you, and a lot more endurance thans healthy.

Good, Dallion split into two hundred instances. So, Im all set. Gleam, create three light beacons at an angle, he ordered. Make sure they point at the same spot, then fly out of there.

I cant do everything at once, the familiar replied with a note of annoyance.

You have five seconds.

A tilted beam of light emerged in the distance. It was quickly followed by a second, and then a third.

Perfect, Dallion thought. Now, he had a rough idea of where the enemy forces were. All that remained now was the final blow.

Astreza, Berennah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea, he recited the names of the Moon instead of counting. That marked two seconds more than he had given Gleam.

Here goes, he cast his spell.

In all instances, a beam of light, amplified manyfold by Gem, shot out from the spell circle in front of him, flying towards the invisible point in which all three of Gleams lines of light would have converged. A strong smell of ozone filled Dallions nostrils as the beam scorched the air, then flew through the mountain, creating a perfectly round hole.

How many did I get? Dallion asked. As he did, he felt someone try to force his instance on a particular one.

Nice try, Dallion pulled back. A tug of war took place. Each side was determined to bring forth their reality. Dallions proved stronger.

Half, he told himself, repeating what Gleam had mentioned. There was a time when that would be considered a huge success. In the current circumstances, Dallion found it half more than he would have liked.

Wasting no time, he followed Adzorgs instructions within his realm, casting a series of portal spells, flying through them. The landscape sped by him in chunks, as if hed acquired a power-up. The process was draining and recklessly dangerous. In dozens of cases, his instances crashed into the mountain, dying in the process. All that was necessary was for one to make it all the way through and one, or rather several, did.

A wide valley extended before Dallion, scarred by the ray of destruction he had just cast.

Thanks, Gem, he said. Good job. Return to my realm.

The aetherfish glowed and shimmered for a few seconds before popping out of existence. Its work was done. There was no further need to put it at risk.

How did you become this vicious? Gleam fluttered down from above.

Slowly at first, then all at once, Dallion replied. Bursting into a new set of instances in search of his enemies. It didnt take long for him to find them.

Those are islands? he asked.

Half a dozen clusters made of solid water were scattered in the distance. Each of them was at least five times larger than a cloud fort, hovering a hundred feet or so from the ground. The magic required to achieve the effect was impressive. Dallion could see powerful clusters of threads organized through its surface, similar to energy circuits. Clearly, Onda hadnt been an outlier, but nymph technology was a lot more advanced than he initially imagined.

Youll have to tell me about them sooner or later, Harp, Dallion said. I cant avoid them any longer.

Theres people too, Gleam added.

Almost at the exact moment, Dallion spotted them as well, making their first appearance on the massive clusters of flying water. It was a safe bet to say that the Azures were here.

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A sneak attack in the back of the empire, Dallion thought. First scouts, then advance forces. If he were to lose or retreat, a greater force would follow, taking advantage of the empires perceived weakness. As things were, he had two choices: pretend he was weak and drive the battle to Sandstorm, where he had a small army to back him up, or pretend he was strong and make a stand alone here. Both options were bad, but taking the fight to his settlement sounded worse.

Dont be a rookie, Vihrogon said. You cant win this fight alone.

Dallion reconsidered his options. His settlement wasnt ready for war on such a scale, not yet. Maybe in a few months when they had settled in, or even a few weeks, theyd have more at stake. Having to fight on their first day risked making them reconsider their decision to join him, and vows or no vows the town wouldnt ever grow.

Doesnt look like I have much of a choice, Dallion summoned all his weapons, enchanting them with flight and levitation spells.

In the distance, the water islands reformed. Spotting their enemy, they increased the distance between them to avoid the losses they had suffered. Losing the element of surprise, Dallion took the time to cast another ray spell. The beam flew at its target, only to crash dozens of self-replicating aether barriers.

Capable things, arent they? He said to himself.

Thats why I didnt want you to fight them, the harpsisword guardian said. Nymphs are a lot more advanced than anything youve seen.

Even the Star?

They took a lot from the Stars knowledge, but developed a lot on their own. Of all seven, mine is the race patronized by Galatea.

Age of the Seventh Moon, Dallion muttered, remembering what Grym had told him. The new age of nymphs.

There would be no point in negotiating. The race had tried to take over the world once, and still seemed to believe that it was owed to them. Fighting remained the only option.

Harp, I need to know where you stand on this.

You know Ill give my life to protect you, she replied.

Yes, but thats not my question. Will you be able to fight by me against them?

That was the real question. One way or another, Dallion needed to know, so he took it into consideration while making his plan. Vihrogon would back him up, but he wouldnt be enough.

In response, the harpsisword changed form, taking on her nymph appearance. No joy could be felt emanating from her, though there was more than enough determination.

Spikes of water shot up from the ground. Entire patches of vegetation withered as any water that was within them was magicked out and transformed into a weapon. The time of calm had ended. The attacking nymphs were determined to take no more chances.

Gleam, are there any golems left? Dallion asked as he darted straight down, casting a series of aether barriers around him.

Three or four, the shardfly replied. Im not sure.

Im relying on you to keep them away from me for a while.

Is that it? Disappointment rang from her very being.

For now.

Four of Gleams wings flapped, covering everything in the vicinity with an illusion of invincibility. It wasn't going to ask long against enemies such as they were facing, but was a nice little boost to have. Done, the familiar flew off.

Same plan as last time? Harp asked.

The odds are best. Dallion replied, extending his magic threads over his body.

The water spires beneath him broke up into projectiles, all flying in his direction. They were countered by a series of spells from the nymph guardian. Although no mage, she had the innate ability to do that much, as well as the combat skills to hit any target.

Water crashed against water, filling the sky with splash explosions. The resulting spray of droplets flew in all directions, slamming into Dallion's aether barriers.

Several of the water islands were getting dangerously near, approaching at the speed of a flight spell.

Is this a trap? Dallion kept on combat splitting. If he were in their place, there was a lot he would have done differently. Maybe they had been ordered to rely on stealth and thus avoid attracting Emperor Tamins direct attention? If so, that was a huge mistake on their part.

Summoning three clay cylinders, Dallion smashed them to bring forth three aether echoes. That represented his entire reserve—unlike other complicated spells, echoes remained limited to his traits. From what he had found, three was the optimal number, each containing the equivalent of a third of his magic level.

Four Dallions moved together in close proximity, then darted off in different directions. Two went straight for the nearest water island, while the other two continued flying towards the ground.

Harp, can you take on an island? Dallion asked.

The nymph gave him a look that combined uncertainty and disagreement.

Just checking, he quickly added.

The island isn't the problem. It's more important: who's on it.

I thought you could defeat anyone.

I can't.

Well, that's not something you'll have to worry about.

Thousands of water projectiles launched from the ground, stretching to the side to create a protective shield of water. It was safe to say that the nymphs had figured out what Dallion was planning and were doing everything in their power to stop him.

Too late. Dallion grabbed the Nox dagger floating by him, then performed a series of line attacks. Black threads hit the shield of water, slicing it into chunks. That was not all. Cracks formed on the waters surface, causing it to lose its solid form.

Dallion didnt even slow down, relying on Harp and his instances to find a way to the ground. At his current speed, the crash was going to be significant. Then again, he had the perfect solution.

You better not say I didnt pick up any tricks from you, grandpa, Dallion thought as he struck the ground with his fist.

REALM CREATION

A green rectangle emerged.

Name the Land you wish to create.

Stone Circle, Dallion said.

You have created the Land of STONE CIRCLE Level 1.

You have full control of the Land of STONE CIRCLE.

A mountain colossus has been made the lands guardian.

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny.

Mountain colossus? Dallion thought. Nice. Very nice.

Of all the guardians he could have received, that was an almost perfect choice. Dallion would have felt awkward if it had turned out to be another nymph or a scylla.

Okay, big guy, time to level you up a bit. Dallion smiled. Then well engage in some domain ruler combat.

Chapter 865: Music Devastation

You have broken through your ninety-sixth barrier.

You are level 96.

Choose the trait you value the most.

A purple rectangle flashed in front of Dallion. One additional advantage of the new domain was the additional levels hed earned. The previous four times Dallion had chosen to improve his empathy trait, raising it to seventy. On this occasion, he hesitated. He could always use a higher reaction, not to mention that his perception was lagging behind as well.

No, he chose empathy again. He had to look at more than short-term gains. Five points wouldnt provide him with an insurmountable advantage. Developing his empathy, in the long term, would.

Nox, do your thing, he ordered.

GUARDIAN CHALLENGE!

Nox has challenged the guardian of STONE CIRCLE on your behalf!

The guardian has no choice but to respond to the challenge.

A towering colossus emerged, rising thousands of feet in the air. If there were clouds in the realm, theyd barely reach his chest. Despite the impressive size, at level five, it was more for show. Without blinking an eye, Dallion performed a dozen line attacks in immediate succession, all aimed at the guardians head.

Used to this sort of attack, the monstrosity raised his arms to cover his face. That proved to be a fatal mistake. Knowing the colossus weak spot, Dallion used his flight spell to circle the guardian until its ear became visible, then performed a series of point attacks.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

Red rectangles stacked near the guardians head.

STONE CIRCLE Level not increased due to lack of inhabitants

4000 inhabitants required for STONE CIRCLE to improve further

The VILLAGE remains Level 5

Dallion paused. He suspected that inhabitants would be area specific, although he had hoped the vicinity to Sandstorm would allow him to use some of the furies in excess of the town limit. In the future, it wouldnt be a bad idea to create a small community here and a few other settlements in order for them to act as sentry-villages.

Soon, he thought, returning to the real world.

The size of the domain wasnt particularly impressive the water islands were larger in size. That was all taken into account. Dallion very well remembered one of the first things he had been told about domains: he controlled everything within them, even the air.

Thought you might need some help, Vihrogon said, stepping into the real world part of the domain. Theres four of us and ten islands. I guess that makes it two and a quarter each?

A volley of water projectiles launched from the nearest island, aimed at Dallion. Once again, Harp blocked them with a series of projectiles of her own.

Drawing the aura sword to him, Dallion performed a point strike in the direction of the water island, while simultaneously casting new aether barriers.

Any idea what were facing? Dallion asked.

A bit before my time. The dryad stretched, vines shooting out of him to strike the few water droplets that Harp had missed. A thousand at most, Id say.

Three hundred, the nymph specified. Its standard for a water island to have three hundred soldiers, all of them capable of magic. At least thirty of them awakened.

That didnt seem too bad. It would have been nice to have a few spy spells to be certain.

Well assume all of them are awakened, Dallion said. Taking a deep breath, he used his awakened power to bring the colossus into the real world.

The ground trembled beneath him. A chunk of rock the size of a fort emerged from the center of the realm, uprooting what little vegetation remained. The head was soon followed by a set of massive stone shoulders.

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Seeing a colossus join the battlefield, all cloud forts focused their attacks there. Bolts the size of towers flew through the valley, followed by a series of line and point attacks. That was the greatest drawback of massive creatures they became easy targets.

Almost simultaneously, Dallion, Harp, and Vihrogon responded. Line and point attacks flew in the opposite direction, in an attempt to negate part of the enemy attacks. As it happened, Dallion kept on taking advantage of the aura sword to cast a variety of aether projectiles towards the nearest water island as well.

Thunder ripped the air, sounding like a series of explosions.

Concentrating, Dallion tried to harden the outer layer of air in his domain, but wasnt able to. If there was such an ability, it was reserved for higher levels. Spells, however, werent.

Two flaming beams of light appeared a short distance away, striking the side of a water island. Dallions echoes had no intention of making things easier for the Azures. The damage was insignificant, but it split the attention of the enemies, at which point Dallion made his move.

As barrages of spells, water, and point attacks kept on flying at the colossus head, the guardian suddenly darted to the side. It wasnt the mass of rock that was moving, though, but the whole domain.

Yes! Dallion thought. This was what domain wars were supposed to be. When dealing with large numbers and territories, it wasnt just about overwhelming power, but adequate support. Colossi had helped him win the battle at the vortex fields, and they were going to help him win this.

Careful! Harp shouted.

Spires of water shot out of the area surrounding his domain, several of which hit the guardian in the shoulder.

MODERATE WOUND

STONE CIRCLE guardians health has been reduced by 20%

A red rectangle flashed before Dallions eyes.

Immediately, a wall of stone rose up, cutting off the sources of the water spires. Finding itself in his domain, the liquid was quickly reformed into a series of blades that darted at an enemy island.

Aether barriers emerged, providing the people of the target enough time to jump off before fatal

impact. Moments later, the massive chunk of water was unable to contain its form, bursting onto the ground.

Unfortunately, the damage to Dallions domain was already done. Despite all efforts, the guardian had lost a quarter of its health in exchange for one out of ten enemy structures.

You cant keep this up. Vihrogon launched a torrent of leaves in the direction of the enemy soldiers. Water can be reused.

More water spires emerged. This time, Dallion pulled the colossus back into the areas realm, as he continued moving towards the center of the valley. Water flew above him, like rockets.

Get back in the mountain, Vihrogon shouted. Its the best strategic

Later! Dallion summoned his mandolin. It had been a while since hed played it. The instrument could by no means be called a weapon, but it would have to do for what he had in mind.

Two more, he told himself. All he had to do was destroy two more islands. That was the psychological point at which the enemy would view the battle as a loss. Even if they didnt retreat immediately, the hesitation would be enough for Dallion to take more decisive actions. At the end of the day, it was all a matter of appearance. If they believed him to be strong, he was going to be strong someone strong enough to move his domain in the heart of the action with no fear.

Harp, ready? He glanced at her. A harpsisword of water had already formed in the nymphs hands.

Destroy your echoes, she told him. Youll need the magic.

It wasnt an ideal solution, but some sacrifices had to be made. In the blink of the eye, the three other Dallions flashed out of existence.

Vih, protect us! Dallion played a chord.

Harp joined in.

Magic infused the sounds, emanating like light throughout the valley. Sharper than blades, stronger than steel, their vibrations cut through every water projectile, slicing into the outer layers of the islands.

That composed only part of the attack. The main focus wasnt its destructive power, but the emotions it spread. Dread, hopelessness, and uncontrollable sadness emanated throughout the valley, coming from two powerful sources.

MUSIC EFFECT - DEVASTATION

The strength of your attack is too strong to be contained.

Youll suffer 10% of its intensity until it stops.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion concentrated, fighting to withstand the effects. The sensation reminded him of what he had witnessed when exploring the world sword. There was no way to measure the current music attack, but if it was as high, the effects would become visible any moment now.

Five seconds passed, then ten. The nearest water islands slowed down, decreasing their attacks. A water golem emerged on the scene, utterly unaffected, yet he was quickly engaged by Gleam.

Of course, Dallion thought. Illusions.

Taking advantage of his reaction trait, he used the time between chords to draw a series of magic symbols on his forehead. Bit by bit, the pain diminished. In terms of physical abilities, Dallion would still suffer the effect, but the illusions he'd drawn on himself ensured that his mind didn't experience any of that. At most, it seemed that he'd spent a night away with no sleep.

A little longer, Dallion told himself.

More of the water island slowed down. A few of the distant ones attempted to target him as before, but Vihrogon was doing a good job of keeping them protected. Hundreds of instances kept shooting thousands of vines, shielding them from all direct attacks, while casting the indirect ones away as well.

Two islands stopped in their tracks, as the humans aboard them jumped off in an effort to stop the pain. Falling a hundred feet wasn't much for an awakened, but in their current state, Dallion could be certain that they would be injured or unconscious at the very least.

Enough. Harp stopped playing.

A little more! Dallion persisted. The contents of his stomach rebelled, screaming to fly out.

Dal. Ice cold water grabbed his hands. That's enough, the nymph added. That's all you can do for now.

Dallion stopped. He knew that she was right, although deep inside, he resented himself for it. Maybe he should have increased his body trait after all? Being driven to such a state after minutes of combat made him feel so weak.

There's nothing wrong, dear boy. Adzorg offered his support from the realm. Fighting an army is like that. Keep in mind, you're not an archduke yet, and your enemies aren't low-level awakened.

Strictly speaking, the old mage was right, but in a war that didn't matter in the least. It was that notion which allowed Dallion to break through the doubt he had put himself in with the last attack. Without a moment to lose, he waved the aura blade, casting a series of healing spells. Green circles emerged, shining a soothing light onto him. That felt much better. A few more seconds and he would almost feel like before. Sadly, he didn't have that much time. Summoning another clay cylinder, Dallion went on to release a ray of destruction at one of the islands still moving. The spell hit its target head on, only to be deflected to the side.

Damn it! Dallion thought.

This hadn't been a standard reaction of the island itself, someone had countered the spell someone with a high level of skills.

It's not over. Dallion flew straight for the island that had deflected the attack. As long as he defeated the commander there, the rest would retreat. Many were already in pretty bad shape as it was.

A line attack flew past Dallion, missing him by inches. The relative calm had come to an end. All Azures that had withstood the music attack were now reengaging in full force. Their attacks seemed a lot slower now that Dallion had gotten used to them. Splitting into fifty instances, he evaded them all with ease. Just to be on the safe side, he cast a few more protective spells, covering himself in a full aether armor.

Just then, another combat splitting took place. A hundred instances burst out of the water island, revealing a skinny man with a weapon twice his size.

A shield blade? Dallion wondered.

He had seen pictures of the weapon in several of the weapon scrolls, but never one in real life. From what he remembered, the weapon was created exclusively for fighting slimes; its flat side was widened and reinforced to the point that it could act as a shield. Only people of considerable skill and strength used such weapons. Handling it with anything below a sixty body trait was outright impossible.

So, its you again, the mans instances said. All of them had spread out on the ground, looking up at Dallion in utter disgust.

I suggest tactical retreat, Adzorg said from Dallions domain.

Why? Dallion asked. Hes not a mage.

He doesnt have to be. Thats one of Archduke Dreuds personal bodyguards. The same that almost killed you while puppeting a boy at the Academy.

Chapter 866: The Echo Inside

Things didnt add up. There was no doubt in Dallions mind that the echo he had fought back at the Academy belonged to a domain ruler, but the person standing before him clearly wasnt. Also, he wasnt supposed to be a mage.

Adzorg, are you sure? Dallion asked.

I had the misfortune of conversing with an echo of his. Theres no doubt.

Could that have been a copyette? Hardly. Other than Pan, all echoes worked for the Order of the Seven Moons.

I thought youd got glassed, Dallion said, retaining his composure. Or were you just scared after hearing what I did to Argus?

You killed him? The man moved the shield blade about. Bloodthirst emanated from him, to the point he could barely contain himself. This might be a challenge after all.

Dallion kept on combat splitting, examining his surroundings with a dozen instances. Everything seemed quiet so far, and that was precisely what concerned him. He could understand the water islands stopping their attacks on him out of fear they might make it more difficult for Gryms bodyguard. Yet, why had they stopped all actions altogether? None were attempting to destroy his domain, none were even moving in that direction. Instead, they seemed to be picking all soldiers affected by Dallions music attack and retreating.

You dont need backup? Dallion arched his brow. Im not a novice anymore.

For a fraction of a second, Dallion expected a kind of response: insults, overconfident remarks, or anything. Then he remembered not everyone fought using music skills.

The mans attack was quick and brutal. With speed rivaling Dallions own, the heavy blade plunged forward in an attempt to slice the aether armor and its occupant.

Dallion considered letting the enemy succeed in an instance, just to see the effects, but quickly decided against it. There was no telling what abilities the weapon had. Plus, he knew that somewhere in the Azure army, there was someone with the ability to control force splitting.

Flying backwards, Dallion thrust his aura sword forward in a point attack. To his surprise, the other didnt block, but evaded, continuing to mount the pressure.

This ones trained. Dallion added several invulnerability symbols to his sword, then parried a blow.

The force was impressive enough to shatter blocks of granite though not more than Dallion could take.

Youve gotten a lot weaker. Dallion used his music skill, filling his words with a combination of anger and sadness. After last time, I thought that youd slice me in two. Then again, last time I was a child.

Strands of music attached without issue. From here on, victory was supposed to be a foregone conclusion, yet the fighting continued.

Spinning in the air, the man pulled back his sword, managing to land a kick in Dallions chest. The top layer of his aether armor cracked. Clearly, the sword wasnt the only thing he was supposed to be worried about.

Thrusting forward, Dallion did an arc slash, while simultaneously summoning his Nox dagger. Dozens of spell circles formed in the wake of the slash, launching chains and aether projectiles at the shield blade.

Another kick flew Dallions way. It was met by a cushion of wind that had been quickly cast. There was more, though. The point of that final spell wasnt to shield Dallion from the attack, but rather to capture his opponent.

Got you! Dallion said, engaging in a multi attack with the Nox dagger. Dozens of strikes fell on the enemys shin, cracking the armor layer by layer.

Dallion didnt notice the precise moment when the deadly blade sliced through the bone, severing the Azures limb.

Caught in the heat of the moment, Dallion quickly changed target, focusing on the mans knee, but just as the strike was about to hit, the other pulled back, moving a safe distance away.

A bit anticlimactic, Dallion said, his heart thumping as euphoria filled his very being. After all that talk, I expected a lot more.

The man stared back. There was no trace of pain or fear on his face. He didnt seem to even have acknowledged the loss of his limb.

Passable, he said.

A thin layer of water ran over the blade of his weapon, covering it completely. Dallion hadn't noticed any spell casting, so his first thought was that the item had a nymph guardian. Moments later, it trickled down from the man's stump, forming a new foot.

What the heck? Dallion's instincts moved back. That was far from expected.

Casting a quick spell, he summoned his bowblade and looked through the kaleidervisto. A single echo was visible in the man's domain: an echo of a nymph in full water armor. The intricacy of the design along with an insignia on the neck guard suggested that he was of high rank, possibly a general.

You're not human, Dallion said.

That explained why wounds and magic attacks had so little effect. They'd only affect the puppet. Or maybe not. Judging by the state of the human, there was every indication that whatever control the original owner of the body had, it was long gone, replaced by that of the symbiotic echo. If so, did that mean that when fighting Phoel, Dallion had faced an echo of an echo?

Dal. Harp arrived at the scene. Despite the amount of strength she had, it was obvious that the guardian was exerting herself. Taking on a humanoid form in the real world was draining, even with Dallion's help.

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Shards of water, as thin as stiletto blades, shot out from her, striking the enemy's right arm from the shoulder to the wrist.

The tension became palpable. Dallion could feel the enemy's desire to fight all the way through the human shell. He was burning to fight Harp, but had enough sense not to. Both Dallion and Harp presented an issue individually. Together, they would be more than enough.

Grym will be pleased I found you, the man said. Next time there won't be a stalemate.

I have no doubt. Dallion smirked. Next time we'll win.

The puppet glared at him, then turned around and flew to his island. The other forces did the same, retreating back the way they arrived. Even the few remaining water golems lost corporeal integrity, splashing onto the valley ground.

You could have waited a bit more, Gleam complained, fluttering all the way to Dallion. I'd have had him.

Dallion didn't doubt that, just as he didn't doubt that they had been extremely lucky. The insane gamble that he had made proved fruitful. Had the water islands continued with the attack, there was no doubt in his mind that he'd lose. Not only that, but there was every chance that they took over Sandstorm as well. Hannah and the awakened there were no pushovers, but other than him, only Diroh was capable of non-natural magic and not an average level at best.

Let's go, Harp urged.

How did they come here? Dallion asked. That many can't have crossed the empire.

There are ways, she replied. Dont ask me to tell you.

I can free you from the harpsisword, Dallion insisted. Even if I lose it, itll be better having I can never leave.

There it was again the flash of fear emanating from the nymph. As someone skilled in magic, she was capable of hiding most of her emotions. Apparently, she wasnt able to conceal this.

They wont arrive right away. Harp changed the focus of the topic. Theres too much fighting in the west.

What are you keeping from me? Just tell me whats going on! Dallion had rarely, if ever, raised his tone to Harp. Internally, he felt shocked by his own actions. And for the first time, the guardian looked him straight in the eye and refused.

No, she said firmly, returning to his realm of her own accord.

Dallion immediately went back to his realm in order to continue the conversation, but when he did so, he found that all the openings to the harpsiswords tower were sealed off, turning it into a cylinder of water.

It didnt take long for Vihrogon to emerge there as well. Standing next to Dallion, he looked at the tower of water, perfectly silent.

Go ahead and say it, Dallion said. I really messed up.

No. The dryad tapped him on the back a few times. You only messed up fifty percent.

You know something, dont you?

I know that shes the strongest entity in your realm, Vihrogon replied. And that it would be a waste of all the awakening trials you completed here, if you were to bring chaos to your realm.

Thats not an answer.

Its an answer, just one you cant seem to accept.

Ive been betrayed too many times, Vih. If theres something I need to know.

You know what they say. The dryad took a step away. Those who have no friends never have to fear betrayal.

After a few more minutes of standing in his realm and doing nothing, Dallion finally returned to the real world. The issue with harp aside, there were a lot of urgent matters that needed attention. The first was figuring out what to do with his second domain. The brief skirmish had left a lot of devastation in the valley, yet left enough plants and water for the Azures to make use of it again.

For that reason, Dallion moved his domain within the mountain hole he had created with his ray spell. There it would serve as a perfect observation point; furthermore, it was a perfect place for furies. Food would still have to come from Sandstorm, at least in the short term, but in all other aspects the spot was perfect.

Thanks to Diroh, just below half of the furies were convinced to change settlements. Dallion took advantage of the fact and improved the settlement to a town. It was noticeable that the action no longer caused Dallions awakened level to increase. He had reached one of the barriers and simply creating settlements wasnt going to cut it. If he wanted to grow, hed have to take control of larger chunks of territory.

The sudden attack had sobered everyones expectations. Being far from the western front, they had forgotten the reality of the world. It was one thing to know that a war was taking place, and something completely different to take part of it.

Furies flew off in all directions with an open invitation to all hunters to join the settlement. Meanwhile, after some domain changes from Dallion, Hannah led the efforts to transform the groups of awakened into an actual army that could fend off serious attacks. Scary even while she was an innkeeper, her new role made it clear why she had been considered one of the legions best. March took on the role of trusted lieutenant while many of the icepickers got instant promotions based on their skills and experience improving items.

All that remained was for Dallion to return to the capital once more and inform the emperor and the Order in subtle way of the events that had conspired.

And dont forget to get the captain this time! Hannah shouted at Dallion prepared to go. Its not a matter of choice!

I will. Dallion forced a smile. He had no idea how long hed have to stay in the imperial capital. Ideally, he could be back with Adzorg by nightfall. Something told him that was unlikely to be the case. Dont lose my towns while Im away.

Towns? Hannah scoffed. Yeah, right. Get out of here. Unlike you, we must work for a living.

The comment earned a chuckle.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

When Dallion left his domain a moment later, he was back in his imperial palace mansion. To his astonishment, the place was in perfect order. Not a single sleeping noble in sight, it looked as if it had just been cleaned.

Whats going on? Dallion asked the area guardian.

Master Dallion, the guardian replied, very much in Taems manner. The young duchess came and had a few words with your guests. It was rather fun.

Good to know. Not bothering to check the second floor, Dallion went straight for the door. Anything else interesting?

Count Pilih came once, but left immediately after seeing you werent here.

The count came in person? Curious, but better left for another time. It was of crucial importance that Dallion got an audience with the emperor, or at least someone with the authority to send a few cloud forts to the east. A few mages could also come in handy, although there were doubts regarding their loyalty.

Just as Dallion opened the door, he found Tors and an overseer standing there; or rather, it was the copyette pretending to be an overseer.

Chapter 867: Return to the Twelve

I need to have Dallion began, but before he could finish the overseers hand darted forward with a speed far exceeding that of the otherworlder.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

A green rectangle indicated that they were no longer in the real world. At this point, Dallions instincts kicked in. Leaping back, he burst into instances, while also summoning his weapons.

No need for that, the copyette said. Im just here to convey a message.

Cautiously, Dallion put down his weapons, although he didnt unsummon them.

I need to see the emperor, Dallion continued. The Azures attacked my settlement. Just a small group for now, but

We know, the copyette interrupted. Two dozen monasteries were infiltrated and destroyed in the last few months.

Two dozen? This was the first Dallion had heard of it. With no one attacking the Order in the known world, he had assumed it would be the same everywhere. Clearly, that wasnt the case. The Order of the Seven Moons held a lot of secrets and never publicized their failures. Few outside of the organization knew of cultist infiltrations. Even less was known of destroyed monasteries. Dallion himself had witnessed one razed by the Star cultists, only to be quickly rebuilt without a word.

So, you agree with me? The emperor must be told.

If hes told, well miss our chance, the copyette flatly refused. Theres every possibility he sends a more experienced noble to take over your domain and fight off the threat. Youll remain in control of your settlements, of course, but your development will end there. Youve had to deal with a noble above you in the past. Do you think itll be different?

Dallion couldnt deny that such an outcome sounded very likely.

Its even possible that he gives the area to Priscord just for the fun of it.

Hearing that, a blob of anger emerged within Dallions forehead. There were a lot of things he could ignore or forgive, but the former Countess Priscord wasnt one of them.

Youre telling me to sacrifice my settlements for the greater good? He frowned. Is that another of the archbishops prophecies?

Yes.

The single word conveyed everything Dallion needed to know. It wasnt a case of blind loyalty, the copyette truly believed that the prophecies held truth, despite them being wrong a few times so far.

War clerics are on their way to fortify the monasteries in your area. An aether map of the known world emerged as the copyette spoke. Theyre moving in small groups so as not to raise suspicion, but when they gather together, theyll be a force to be reckoned with.

Sooner or later the emperor will find out.

Thats a given. Which doesnt give you too much time to get into the inner sanctum of the Twelve Suns.

Of all the things that Dallion expected, that was the last. With everything going on in relation to his settlements, he had all but forgotten about the Order of the Twelve Suns.

Come on. He looked to the side. As he did, he found that another version of the copyette was standing next to him as well.

Weve learned that an event of major importance will take place soon. The slime ignored Dallions reaction. Its believed that a close relative of the emperor will take part in it. Were not talking about any of the branch families, but someone whos in the line of succession. A ruler without direct heirs will inevitably become a victim to rumors, even the emperor.

Strange. Dallion hadnt heard any such rumors. He was just about to make a remark, when it hit him: he hadnt heard any such rumors. In a city that lived on gossip, every major house was discussed. House Elazni was especially prominent, with opinions split between Dallion being outcast to drop out of the race and him being sent there to gain some quick hands-on experience before replacing the duchess. There was no way people wouldnt discuss the future of the empire. So far, the direct line of succession had continued without fail for hundreds of years.

Hes been suppressing it, Dallion said, trying to think of anything else that people were actively not discussing.

The person in question is Duke Ablā Eir, second duke of the empire.

During his time in the capital, Dallion had occasionally heard the name. Like most of the established members of the main imperial house, he didnt have to involve himself in the local webs of intrigue and politics. Supposedly, he was adequately skilled, but the same could be said for most imperials. Training echoes, artifacts, and skill gems werent an issue, allowing them to achieve in weeks what others couldnt in decades. The only limit was the one they were born with.

Is he part of the Sun Order? Dallion asked.

We suspect he might be of the inner sanctum. Either way, the archbishop has prophesied that hell take part in the event, along with a select group of other members. If you make it there, youll be selected as well.

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Dallion didnt like that at all. He was taking a huge risk based on the prophecy of someone he hadnt seen. Unfortunately, he wasnt given a choice. His alliance with the Order of the Seven Moons was mostly in their favor. If Dallion were to walk away, hed lose their support.

I just have to make it to the inner sanctum? he asked.

As you said, time is a factor. You must do it today.

Sure. Dallion hissed. Anything else youd like me to do while Im at it?

Prepare your tools and equipment beforehand. Youre allowed to bring anything with you, but you cant use skills different from those tested.

You dont say. Despite Dallions sarcasm, that was a useful piece of information. He had considered using magic to summon his equipment in the common room of the Zodiac building. Good thing he didnt or the mess would have been greater. Anything else?

Well be in touch.

Dallion was ejected from the copyettes personal realm and thrown into the real world. Fractions of a second later, the overseer sunk into the ground, disappearing as well. As far as the city was concerned, the conversation never happened.

Youre such a bastard, archbishop, Dallion said to himself. His webs were just as strong as those of the emperor. For Dallion to succeed with his goal, hed have to break through them, yet now wasnt the time.

Summoning his hammer, Dallion set off for the Zodiac building. The noises and sensations of the city were the same as always. The powerful remained in their buildings, while leeches moved about the streets, taking every opportunity to do nothing. Thanks to the recent level boost, though, he was also able to notice something else: the patterns of emotions of the domain. As an experienced user of music skills, Dallion had grown accustomed to recognizing the emotions of people, plants, animals, items, or even small areas. His domain ruler skills had boosted that allowing him to see the flows moving about like rivers.

Thats how limiting echoes are created, Vihrogon said from within his realm.

To be honest, Dallion didnt expect domain rulers to personally invade the realm of every person to place a limiting echo there. Being able to see the flow of emotions in practice, though, gave him a sense of what he would face. There was more to domain ruler combat than simple battles and armies.

Welcome back, sir. The porter bowed low as Dallion neared the buildings entrance.

I want to see Unnie. Dallion added a few touches of arrogance to his voice.

Of course, sir. Ill inform her to join you in the common room.

Id like to see her outside, Dallion specified.

Outside, sir? The mans tone was unusually dry, almost as if hed seen it all before. Im afraid that would be impossible, sir. Members are not allowed outside of the building in their Order apparel.

That was an excuse Dallion didnt expect to hear.

Then ask her this for me. Can I use magic to summon my materials and equipment? Or must I carry them to the door myself?

There was a momentary pause.

Summoning them before the start of the trial is fine, sir, the porter replied. You are even welcome to do it in the common room.

So much for the copyettes information, Dallion thought as he entered the building.

The smell of stale tobacco filled the lobby section leading to the common hall. Likely someone had experimented with recreating something from Earth. With virtually no otherworlders left in the capital, there was no way for things not to go astray.

Unnie was standing beside the next trial door, wearing her usual black gem jeans, this time along with an orange jumper of jade thread. No doubt the outfit was meant to impress, but Dallion found it outright comical.

So wonderful to see you, the woman said. The Order of the Twelve Suns admires effort and persistence.

Giving her a quick glance, Dallion cast a quick spell. A large anvil appeared along with a miniature furnace, a rack of tools, and a pile of ingots of various metals.

I just have to open the door, right? Dallion took a step closer.

Unlock it. If you try to force it open, even with the expected skills, youd have failed.

I only have one go?

The Suns dont believe in second chances. Remember, its your goal to prove yourself to us, not the other way around.

What a load of snobs, Dallion clenched his teeth. If it wasnt for the archbishop, he wouldnt have gone along with this. Making it to the common room was enough to obtain general recognition. The rest was superfluous.

Unlock, he repeated, correcting himself.

Yes, thats all it takes. And don't worry, youre free to use your magic to summon any tool, device, or materials. You merely cant use them to create the actual item.

Clearly, they werent aware of magic forging.

See you on the other side, then.

Dallion was about to start, when the woman moved in front of him, hands extended forward.

Just one other thing, she added. You need to use this. She handed him a ring of black metal.

An artifact?

A precaution, if you will. We need to be sure that you arent using your magic vision.

That stood to reason, but it also could be a trap. In the home of paranoia, where the simplest action or inaction could ruin careers, Dallion was wise to be cautious.

So much for trust.

Trust is only determined after the fact.

The argument could well have continued for a while longer, but Dallion quickly took the ring and put it on his left pinky finger. All magic threads he could see abruptly disappeared.

Gen, is everything okay in there? Dallion decided to check.

All good so far. No portals, no realm invasion, the echo replied.

Am I allowed to enter the doors realm?

Only if you find a way to.

Taking a few steps forward, Dallion put his hand on the door. Just like last time, nothing occurred. Normally, any object would have a realm, and often a guardian. This one merely kept shimmering in an otherworldly light. It was obvious that the material was metalDallions forging skills told him that muchbut for all intents and purposes, it was so foreign that it might not exist.

No magic and no entering its realm, Dallion thought, sliding his fingers along the cold surface. Obviously, there was a way to complete the trial, but how exactly? The four crafting skills were forging, carving, arts, and scholar. Similar to the first trial, all of them would have to be used to go through this.

Avoiding the door would also constitute a failure, Unnie said. Just in case youre considering it.

I wasnt. Dallion lied. One more thing, though. If I break part of the door, but not enough to pass through, would I still lose?

If youre as skilled as people claim, you already have everything necessary to complete the trial, the woman replied in a way that suggested that damaging the door in any way might be considered a failure.

Alright, lets get cracking, Dallion thought.

Chapter 868: Lock Trial of the Twelve Suns

The door appeared to be one large slab of metal. There were no keyholes, no handles, just a frame and a pair of metal sheets within it. A single line ran down the middle, indicating the place where the doors met. One could say it dared Dallion to slide his thread cutter through and pry the door open. There was every likelihood the method would work, just as it was certain to cause him to fail the trial. As Unnie had told him, the goal was to demonstrate ability in the second set of skills, not just pass through.

I must admit, Im envious of you, dear boy, Adzorg said from his domain with a sigh. Youre in a temple of otherworlder life.

Maybe you can ask the emperor to make you an honorary member?

Very funny. On another note, your return has stirred things again. Theres some indication that I might be released into your custody. A pity, even if a welcome one.

Pity?

I was actually winning the current game we were playing. A rare occasion, to be certain. Between you and me, that might have contributed to the decision.

Dallion cracked a smile. If nothing else, the old mage was worth returning to the capital for.

Found the answer already? Unnie asked, reacting to Dallions smile.

Maybe, Dallion lied. It was time to focus on the task at hand again.

On the surface, the door was simple to the extreme. There were no components, decorations, latches, or openings to put anything in. In many ways, it reminded Dallion of an elevator door. Given that he had glimpsed similar items in the fallen south, he could expect a mechanism of some sort, yet he couldn't locate the power source.

Lets think logically, Dallion said to himself. This is meant for non-mage awakened, so magic cannot be the answer. And neither is force.

Cautiously, Dallion placed all five fingers of his right hand on the left part of the door and slid them along the smooth surface. The material was cool with no signs of temperature variation.

Back when Dallion used to go through his awakening trials, Adzorg used to say that the answer was always present in the question. What Dallion had learned through personal experience was that there were even more answers in the restrictions imposed.

Combining his forging skill with layer vision, he examined the door more closely. A whole different picture emerged in front of him. While the metal came from Earthsome sort of aluminum alloy, if he would guess it wasn't entirely homogeneous. In fact, in places, it was incredibly thin, just like a layer covering up the real mechanism.

When was this made? Dallion asked, following the imperfections. The design was too precise to be random. It rather resembled a circuit of sorts, waiting to be activated.

Centuries ago, the woman said.

It's in too good condition. Dallion took a step back. It was notable that the imperfections were only on the right part of the door. More interestingly, they formed a very specific pattern.

Buttons, Dallion thought. There could be no doubt the thin layer was hiding buttons beneath it. When Unnie said that he needed a key, she hadn't specified that it had to be physical. If his guess was correct, all a person needed to do was input the correct combination of buttons by pressing specific points on the door's surface. Upon matching the combination, it would open, allowing him inside. It was something an otherworlder would think of, and yet it also seemed overly simple. For one thing, it required a good mastery of forging, without relying on any of the other three crafting skills.

Dallion reached out to try his luck, but then stopped. Brute forcing the correct combination was unlikely to work. There had to be another trick. There had to be a way for him to get a better look, but what was it? Back in the Broken Stars pyramid, he had entered the realm of the lock to find the means to bypass it. The same was impossible here or was it.

Once again, Dallion focused on the door. After a few seconds, his attention diverted to the frame. Unlike the door itself, that didn't have an otherworldly glow. There was no way that could be a coincidence. Reaching out, Dallion pressed the side of the frame with his index finger.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

You are in the land of DOOR FRAME.

The DOOR FRAMEs destiny has already been fulfilled.

Reality shifted, bringing Dallion into a realm made of cliffs and wind. A massive mountain extended both up and down from the ledge he was on, vanishing into infinity. Yet, the jagged cliffs werent made of stone, but millions of metal shards.

Cheeky, Dallion said. You almost had me there.

There was no response. According to the blue rectangle, the realm was deprived of guardians, yet that didnt make it empty. Dallions instinct was to cast a spell and reach the top of the cliff. That wasnt allowed, and neither was using any companions while scholarly skills were considered crafting skills, zoology definitely wasnt. In order to reach the top, Dallion was going to

You must be kidding me. He let out a bitter laugh. Athletic and acrobatic skills were also forbidden during this trial. You want me to forge my way up there?

It was either that or carving; more likely carving.

Look on the bright side, Adzorg said. At least you figured out another part of the puzzle.

Some puzzle. Summoning his hammer, Dallion started chiseling.

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Bronze markers appeared on the cliffs surface, showing him exactly which parts to remove. Doing so with a forging hammer wasnt an easy task, yet in Dallions case, it was more of a nuisance than anything else.

Hours passed. Thanks to his body and reaction traits, Dallion was moving up five times the speed a normal person would be running. Given the size of the cliff, that still left a lot to be desired. The sun set in the realm, replaced by the Red and Cyan Moons and still, there was no indication the top of the mountain was anywhere near.

There has to be an easier way, Dallion told himself. It was absurd that the trial involved repetition to such a level.

You never know, dear boy. Maybe its aimed at testing your stamina as well?

They have a pretty good idea of my stamina from my previous trial, Dallion grumbled.

Why couldnt this be a standard crafting trial? There wasnt an item he couldnt make possibly with the exception of sphere and world items, of course. All of his crafting skills were at a hundred, and he had constructed and obtained enough blueprints to impress anyone. Maybe he wasnt at the level of a master craftsman of Count Pilihs level, but still close.

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion split into instances, spreading along the side of the mountain. Blades of various shapes and sizes rained on the side of the cliff, bouncing off as they did.

Bladerers! Dallion turned around to look at the sky with several instances.

Dozens of them were flying towards the mountain, with hundreds more on the way behind them. Moonlight shined off the sharp metallic blades, causing them to appear like red and blue flashes of light.

Dont attack! Vihrogon shouted from Dallions domain. You can only use crafting skills.

Anyones first thought would be that this cant be part of the trial. There was no way one could face so many enemies and not be ejected from the realm without using some combat skills.

Damn it! Dallion hissed. There was one alternative, which if true, painted a very poor picture on the Order of the Twelve Suns. Just as carving and forging could be used for combat, artsor dancing in particularcould be used for evasion.

Whoever came up with this idea was really sick! Dallion dropped off the section of the cliff, using his art skills to dance along the footholds he had already made.

Other than the skills allowed, this was no different from the common room trialDallion still had to face enemies in combat and little else. There was no clever trick, no actual craftsmanship, just the ability to improve his fighting.

A bladerer swooped at him, its massive wings of blades expanding to cover as large an area as possible.

If thats the way you want it, Dallion split into fifty instances, striking the constructs shoulder.

Since the balderer was effectively living armor, Dallions forgings skills allowed him to see the weak spots, while his carving skills presented the best way to peel parts off.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

ARM SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its LEFT ARM

A pair of red rectangles emerged. Losing one of its wings, the bladerer fell to the endlessness below. Sadly, he was quickly replaced by another two.

Youre getting on my nerves! Dallion struck again.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

ARM SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its LEFT ARM

TERMINAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

One of the new attackers followed the first on the way down, while the second disappeared in a cloud of fading particles, having its head carved off.

Even Dallion had to admit that forcing him to use such skills for combat purposes opened up a few new tricks. If he were facing a few dozen enemies, maybe such an approach would have worked. Against hundredseven with his level of combat splitting, he was bound to tire or make a mistake.

Keep it up, dear boy! Adzorg encouraged. You lose nothing by hanging on.

Technically, the old mage was correct. If Dallion were to lose the trial, it would be after getting ejected from the realm. Was there a point in fighting without a chance of success? Even if he somehow killed all the bladerers, he was no closer to discovering how to open the door. Unless the bladerers were the way.

Splitting into a hundred instances, Dallion took a better look at how the bladerers were arranged. While the distant ones kept on throwing blades, only a pair had approached up to the cliff itself. Using his scholarly skills, he determined that the distance between pairs of bladerers was just enough for him to reach by jumping; or rather by dancing.

There was a brief moment of hesitation. Once it was gone, Dallion pushed off the metal cliff, landing on the nearest bladerers shoulder. Blades flew off the constructs wings. Before they could reach Dallion, he used the established carving method to decapitate the entity.

TERMINAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

A red rectangle appearedDallions cue to move on to the next.

As he did, the sun emerged from the horizon. Moving three times as fast as in the real world, it flooded the realm with light, providing Dallion with a far better view. In the bright light, it was obvious that the bladerers were in fact thousands, not merely hundreds, as he expected. That wasnt the main issue. From his current position, Dallion was able to see a massive change on the mountain he had leaped off from. A large section stuck out, perpendicular to the cliff face. Dallion had been climbing so far. It was absolutely massive, stretching miles in length, and at least ten times more in height. A faint glow of purple was visible along the outermost part of the chunka glow Dallion had gotten to know quite well.

Portals, he said. The end of the chunk was covered in portals.

I dont see how that helps you, Vihrogon said.

A lock, Dallion said as he kept on dancing from one bladerer to another, killing them off in the process. Thats the tongue of a giant lock!

This was how he was supposed to enter the realm of the door proper. With this, he had been given the answer to the question. All that remained now was for him to nail the execution.

Chapter 869: Inner Sanctum

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

The closer Dallion got to the lock tongue the more aggressive the bladerers became. Splitting into over two hundred instances, Dallion still couldn't avoid all wounds. For the moment he'd only received a few, but without spellcraft or familiars they were stacking up. By his rough estimates, two-thirds were enough for the next realm. That means he could only get hit three times more.

Why such a focus on combat? He wondered.

Thanks to the mage Academy it was easy to instantly determine what skills one had without any trials. The reason had to be to keep leeches from freely joining in. Almost everyone in the imperial capital was considered special in one way or another. Receiving a quick trip to level twenty through the aid of echoes and high-level awakening altars tended to eliminate any amount of effort. An organization that was based on skills had to make sure that its members used them adequately.

Twisting in the air, Dallion propelled himself off a bladerer, heading towards the side of the metal cliff. Markers danced in front of him, indicating where to strike to form a foothold. In seventy-eight instances, Dallion did, and in seventy-eight instances he succeeded.

Almost there.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

A blade hit his calf right at the moment he was about to burst into instances again. That was highly unfortunate, though acceptable, as long as he didn't receive another.

It was so annoying not to be able to combine crafting with combat skills, but Dallion put up with it. Dancing up the vertical cliff surface, he swung his hammer, using it to thread through the metal while avoiding the rain of blades that surrounded him.

Dallion's instances kept on getting hit faster and faster, yet never enough for him to suffer more wounds. The portal was less than twenty feet away enough for one leap, using athletics and acrobatic skills. Without them, Dallion was forced to spend four more seconds using his expected approach. The moment he did, the reality of the realm was instantly replaced by a new one.

You are in the land of DOOR.

The DOORs destiny has already been fulfilled.

Another sphere item? Dallion wondered. That's too much for a coincidence,

Onda had mentioned a while back that it was possible for Dallion to learn sphere and world item forging. Clearly, someone in the empire had beaten him to it.

The new realm was once again made of metal, but instead of cliffs, it had massive clusters of pipes spread in all directions in-between mountains of gears.

An interesting composition, Adzorg said.

Not much. It's the inside of the lock mechanism.

The sky was completely absent in the realm, replaced by dull shimmering greyness. Without a doubt, that had to be the protective surface layer of the door.

Dallion took a few steps forward. A metal plaque was clearly visible twenty feet away, placed prominently on one of the metal pipes. Three names were etched on it in a very formal-looking font: Clark, Tamin, and Assetion.

Two of the names didnt mean a thing, and as for the thirdthere wasnt a person in the entire world that didnt know it.

Does that mean anything to anyone? Dallion asked, sliding his finger along the plague.

Other than the obvious, not particularly, Adzorg reluctantly admitted. I suspect they were the remaining founding members back when the Order was created.

Clark and Assetion, Dallion repeated. Thinking back to all the historical scrolls and poems hed read, there was no mention of them. The fact that he was able to read them even now meant they hadnt been banished.

Maybe part of the test was to make gear suitable for combat using those skills, dear boy?

Makes sense. Dallions forging vision made it apparent that the inside of the plaque was wedged into the frame, rather than attached. Using his fingernails, he attempted to pull out the corner. The plaque gave in, allowing itself to be taken out.

On the back, something else was inscribed. More specifically, a sketch was carved into the sheet of metal, indicating what spots on the door to press, and in what order, to get it to open.

The details matched what Dallion remembered, but still it seemed a bit too easy.

Thats an unexpected stroke of luck, Adzorg commented. How did you think of checking there?

I dont know Dallion turned the plague around. I just had a feeling.

It was said that there was no such thing as a coincidence or a free lunch. Dallion tended to agree. Returning the plaque to its place, he set off to explore the domain.

Hour after hour, he walked, split into a hundred instances, ready at any point to engage an unseen enemy. None appeared.

After half a day, Dallion found one of the energy sources. It was, as he expected, a large cube-shaped mana crystal, though nowhere as impressive as the Moonstones.

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From what he could determine, thanks to his scholar skills, the lock followed the well-established magnetic lock mechanism back on Earth. A correct keypad combination would activate a spell, allowing both parts of the door to slide to the side. In theory, there was no reason for Dallion not to leave and try the plaque instructions. The thought of having to go through the bladerers again made him spend a bit more time in the realm.

With the power source located, it was a simple matter of following the pipe connection to the nearest gear mountain. From close by, they seemed even taller than before, rising all the way almost to the sky itself.

So, that's where I press, Dallion told himself.

Each mountain was an input device. Exploring the inner workings of one of them, let alone all, would likely take days, if not weeks. That was more time than Dallion was willing to dedicate, which was why he returned to the magic cube.

Doesn't seem like you to give up, the old mage remarked.

I'm not. Dallion went to the part in the base from which the pipes were heading out. Just using the skills required.

Summoning his hammer, he carved out sections of both pipes, revealing inner cores of sun gold. Dallion would have felt a lot better if he was able to see the actual magic threads, but maybe that was the purpose of the limitation. Nonetheless, he summoned several ingots of sun gold and forged them into a very long and curved bar.

What are you planning to do, dear boy? Adzorg didn't sound certain.

Dallion summoned two blocks of wood which he carved into a rudimentary handle that he placed in the middle of the bar.

Hopefully, get out of here. Holding the piece of metal by the wooden handle, he lowered it until both sides came into contact with the sun gold of the tubes.

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to leave the realm, smash the window

A green rectangle popped up.

So, I was right. Dallion did just that.

Reality swarmed around him, returning him to the common room of the Zodiac building. To his great relief, both sides of the metal door slid to the side, opening the way forward.

Rather impressive, Unnie said, astonishment overflowing in her voice. You're the first I've seen to open it in this fashion.

What can I say? Dallion moved his hand off the door frame. I like to be unique.

You undoubtedly are. The woman gestured, inviting him to continue forward. After you, please.

Soaking in the attention he was getting from the common room members, and a healthy degree of envious emanations, Dallion continued forward. The new hall was half as big as the previous one, but noticeably superior. In terms of comparison, it was like walking from a four-star hotel to a luxury five-star establishment. The furniture was a lot more modern, crafted with precision and diligence out of the rarest materials the world had to offer. In addition to large paintings covering the walls, there were a number of full-size statues of past members of the Order, along with weapons on display.

Is Count Pili a member? Dallion slid the limiting artifact off his finger and handed it to Unnie. He has a room with a similar arrangement.

The current one? No. I believe his grandfather was the last active member. Its possible that he brought the current count as a child.

Good to know they allow family members, Dallion thought as he looked around. One thing immediately caught his attention. A short distance away, secured within a glass case, was an unmistakable mobile phone. It was oldprobably from the early two thousandsbut definitely from Earth.

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

Dont look at me, dear boy. Id have taken action if I knew it was here.

Who made that? Dallion pointed at the phone.

Oh, one of our marvels. Im not exactly sure. Some say it might have been constructed by a past emperor himself. Its one of our older items, yet that doesnt make it any less fascinating than any of the new additions.

You can say that again.

Before youre officially welcome to the uncommon room, theres a small formality. The woman reached into her pocket and took out a small kaleidervristo device. Please hold this, if you would.

That explained why no copyette had managed to infiltrate the Order of the Twelve Suns. Despite the place screaming snobbish cult, the people were vigilant and had a very good idea of what they were doing.

Certainly. Dallion took the device with his right hand. Afraid I might turn out to be a chainling? he asked casually.

Of course not. The intonation of the womans voice shifted, indicating she was likely lying. Its one of the old traditions that remain. Without asking, she took the kaleidervristo from his hand and put it away again.

I see. So, wheres the next trial?

A number of doors were visible in the room, yet none of them appeared particularly special. Thinking that might be part of the trial, Dallion carefully followed the magic threads within each of them, searching for differences. As far as he could see, there werent any.

You want to continue right away? Unnie sounded surprised.

Is there a reason I couldnt?

No its just She paused for. There was no telling what skills she was using, but it took less than a moment for her to regain her composure. Please excuse me, she added with a smile. You just caught me by surprise. Usually, members whove made it this far choose to celebrate the occasion. Although all our members fulfill the requirements for entry, not everyone has the experience of proceeding to the inner sanctum on their first go. Its been known to take years for someone to reach the uncommon room, and twice that long to move on from it. This way, please.

The woman led the way to a normal-looking door at the far end of the room. Try as hard as he might, Dallion was still unable to see any indication that this was the door. As far as he was concerned, a strong draft was enough to break it open.

I take it the same rules apply? Dallion asked. Use all four rare skills to open the door without breaking it?

Maybe when the Order was initially established, Unnie let out a chuckle. All you need to do is open the door without touching it or using any common or uncommon skill.

Just that? Dallion looked at her.

Just that.

The temptation to wrap his hand in a piece of clothing and open the door was tremendous. It would be good for a laugh, but after putting so many things on hold just to get here, Dallion decided not to risk it.

Hello, door, Dallion said, using his empathy trait.

My word! The door guardian replied in a distinctly British accent. As I live and breathe. I didnt expect to see a new empath since my owner built me all those centuries ago.

Yes, I heard there arent many of us nowadays.

Sadly true. Back in my youth, I remember the room was filled with empath ladies and gentlemen. We used to lead charming conversations all the time, discussing the issues of the world, philosophy, and architecture.

In truth, it had been a while since Dallion had a proper conversation with a guardian. As cliché as it was, he hardly had time for the little guardians. Most of his interactions were with area guardians, or items on enemies.

I can emphasize, Dallion said. Any chance you can open up and let me in?

Ah, but of course. I should better do that, shouldnt I? The door creaked open. And do pass by for a chat sometime. That would be absolutely smashing.

Ill do my best. Dallion couldnt help but smile.

Is that good enough? he looked at Unnie. Technically, one could argue that he hadnt used a skill, but it was close enough and also followed the rules as they were given to him.

More than enough, sir, the woman replied.

Sir? He gave her a strange look.

You are a member of the inner sanctum, sir, an honor I have yet to be privy to.

I see. That explained her reluctance to have Dallion move along. Most likely, she felt slightly humiliated by the fact. Thank you for being my guide, then.

My absolute pleasure, sir. A spark of pride resonated from within her. If at any point you require further assistance, dont hesitate to let me know.

Sure. Out of habit, Dallion cast a spell to levitate an inch above the floor, then flew into the next room.

The chamber was simultaneously the smallest and largest he had seen so far. The room itself was average in size, made entirely of stone. Thanks to the layers of magic symbols on the walls, it created the impression of being the size of a town overlooking waterfalls on three sides. Aether plants and creatures filled the vast, brightly lit walls of marble, while humanoid aether golems tended to the members present carrying moon platinum platters full of refreshments.

It was not the room itself that left Dallion speechless, but one of the people in it.

It was about time you got here, cousin, Tors Elazni said from a throne-like chair. I thought you'd never manage.

Chapter 870: The Order's Treasure

What are you doing here? Dallion retained his composure.

What am I doing here? A mocking smirk formed on Tors' face. I'm the one who backed your invitation. Did you imagine these things just happen?

That was a surprise in more ways than one. Tors never hid his disdain of Dallion. The only reason he was even engaging in conversation was because of their title difference. When Dallion was a baron, the noble took every chance to degrade him. Now that the otherworlder was a count, his opinions hadn't changed, but he was savvy enough to create the appearance that they had.

I didn't know you were a member of the Twelve Suns. Dallion made his way further into the room. The door closed behind him, disappearing beneath a layer of illusion.

Knowing our great-grandmother, how do you think I became her favorite grandson?

You don't have twelve skills.

That rule went out of fashion centuries ago. Nine skills are enough now.

There was a touch of irony that the Order of the Twelve Suns had started admitting members with nine skills. There was no denying the practical need. Now, Dallion fully understood the difficulty of the second trial. For all intents and purposes, that was the final step to be acknowledged as a proper candidate: perfect mastery of eight skills, and knowledge of one or two more. After the Green and Purple Moon had hidden their faces away from the world, it must have become incredibly difficult for someone to have the full set of twelve. As far as Dallion knew, other than himself, only the emperor had such a mastery.

And the young duchess? Dallion asked.

She's crippled. Cruel joy emanated from Tors. Her music skills are the best the family has seen since your grandmother, I believe. And yet she had the simplest skill blocked upon awakening. He made a sign for one of the waiter golems to serve him a glass of glowing amber liquid. A complete lack of athletic skills.

I was nearly the same, Dallion thought.

Although circumstances were different, he too had considered forsaking attack skills once his first skill choice was offered. If necessity hadn't forced him, he would have undoubtedly preferred

forging skills, turning him into a valued crafter with a very limited combat ability. There was every chance that he would have remained in Dherma village, raising a family, joining the elder council at most, he would have traveled to a few of the neighboring settlements.

But enough about her. With you, our house has two members in the inner sanctum. Tors took the drink from the platter and downed it in one gulp. As a matter of fact, your timing is perfect. I'd like to introduce you to someone.

Returning the empty glass, the noble stood up and turned towards the section with a view of the east waterfall. Dallion followed. He could see why his cousin believed he had a valid chance to take over from the old duchess. Despite his terrible character, he was rather skilled as well as a domain ruler. Being a member of the Twelve Suns was more than a secret society. It provided a direct link to the emperor. That was also the reason Tors was so fearful of being replaced for the position with his twelve skills. Dallion was well ahead.

Three people were standing at the edge of the vast opening, observing the waterfall. One of them was a mage. Dallion could see the difference in magic threads even from this distance. The remaining two had to be skilled as well, but were wearing artifacts that kept Dallion from taking a peek at their trait levels.

So, what happens in the inner sanctum? he asked casually. Sitting around, talking about otherworlders and the good old days?

That's for those in the other rooms. As members of the Order, were discouraged to speak ill of them, but they're just a faade. Don't get me wrong, they have skills and some of them I could even call friends, but they're members only in name. Back when the Zenith building was first constructed, the rooms were reserved for candidates. Here's where the real decisions are made.

Funny you could say that with a straight face, Dallion thought. From what he could gather, in a different time, Tors and all other sub-twelve skill candidates wouldn't have moved beyond the common room.

He's here, an item guardian whispered. Yet, the comment wasn't meant for Dallion.

Abla, Pierce, Tors shouted once fifty feet from the end of the room. Look who I brought.

Two of the people turned around. The third one remained staring in the distance.

With this, I won the bet.

Dallion would have very much liked to call his cousin a sniveling ass-kisser, but based on the emotions emanating from the people, they held each other with a good degree of respect. Reading into the bouquet, it could be said that Tors was considered the new kid on the block.

Dallion? the mage asked. Clearly, titles weren't a thing in the Order of the Twelve Suns.

Yes, sir.

Pierce, the other said.

Looking at him, he could pass as a caravan assistant. His clothes were normal to the extreme, though practical. There were no illusions cast on them, no gem threads or precious metal decorations. A person with such an outfit could last months in the wilderness and not cause a fuss.

And no sir. The mage smiled. Thats for those up to the uncommon room.

Astra. The person beside him said. The only lady present, her outfit too, was more manly than one would expect for the capital, although she had allowed herself a few purely aesthetic modifications when it came to the shirt and vest. You cost me a few favors. She gave Tors a quick glance. Given your lifestyle, I didnt think youd bother to join the Order, let alone make your way here.

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My lifestyle?

Hes a hunter, Pierce joined in. You cant expect him to remain cooped up in one place. Weve got a few of those, by the way.

Noble hunters, Astra added with a note of disapproval. Skilled, experienced, but never there when you need them.

That made sense, but also warned Dallion not to underestimate the people in this room. Although in the capital, these werent the sheltered types. If it came to a fight, there was no telling whod end up victorious. Despite his reluctance, Dallion also had to reevaluate his opinion of Tors. It was possible that ten levels ago he could have defeated Dallion in battle, potentially even killed him.

The prodigy finally arrives,

someone said, though not an item. Slowly and with gravitas, the last person turned around. His clothes were markedly more expensive than everyone elses here, yet he didnt give the appearance of someone who wore them to show off. Rather, he gave the impression of having nothing else available. A gold circle was visible, embroidered on the right side of his very finely crafted diamond thread shirt.

Abla, the man introduced himself. Im glad we finally met. Was getting boring talking to the furniture alone all the time.

Youre an empath. Dallion felt a sudden chill. He had been hearing rumors of other empaths in the empire. Item guardians had sporadically mentioned it occasionally, some in the Learning Hall of the Academy itself. Yet, he had given up all hope of meeting the man.

An eleven-skilled prodigy, the other confirmed. Though not a twelve such as you.

Dont feel bad. Pierce gave him a pat on the shoulder. You just lucked out on magic.

The atmosphere remained casual, even warm. For a moment, Dallion almost felt as if he were back in the Icepicker guild. At the same time, he knew fully well he wasnt. Right now, he was in the presence of monsters, each having a completely different view of the world than the common person. What was more, he himself was one of the monsters.

I hear youve been sharpening your skills every chance you get, Abla said.

I try, Dallion replied.

Reached the hundred?

Skillwise yes, otherwise, no.

Hmm. There was no telling whether the man was disappointed or impressed. Try to reach a hundred if you can. The Order of the Sun might need you soon.

The man seemed to take a single step, completely disappearing in the process. Those with high enough perception would see him move at speeds faster than an awakened fury. Dallion couldn't say he was impressed with the speed itself. Rather, he was intrigued by the fact that at no point did Ablan run. Rather, he just walked off, his motions hundreds of times faster than that of an ordinary person. This was no sheltered behavior. One could have only acquired it after years in the wilderness.

Archbishop, how in hell did you plan this? He wondered.

The odds of him running into the imperial duke were one in a million, and yet the archbishop had predicted them precisely to the minute. If he'd come any later, there was every chance that the meeting and more importantly, the offer wouldn't have taken place. At most, Dallion might have gotten to have a conversation with the remaining two members.

Don't mind him, he doesn't believe in wasting time on traveling, Astra said. I'm sure you'll see more of each other. Tors, she turned to the Elazni, did you show him the shrine?

I have somewhere to be as well, the noble said, clearly annoyed. I'm sure our fabled prodigy will figure it out on his own. Then he, too, vanished. The difference was that, unlike the duke, he was running.

Might be just me, but I don't think he likes you a lot, Pierce whispered.

Family issues, Dallion said, remaining on guard. He didn't like him and Tors being so close. Hopefully, the Order of the Twelve Suns had rules about members not attacking each other frivolously. Nothing unusual. So, you have an awakening altar?

No. The Order of the Seven Moons have those. We have something a lot rarer, and for people like us much more useful. Come along.

Feeling like a stranger in a tourist trap, Dallion had no choice but to follow. Nine times out of ten, the great secret would turn out to be something completely useless but with a lot of historic significance. There was a brief moment in which Dallion was hoping to get a look at the forty-level altar, not that he needed it.

The room changed as they walked. Using his aether vision, Dallion was able to see as they went to one of the room's walls, where another, less prominent door was placed. Three layers of illusion covered it, creating a majestic marble gazebo surrounded by veils of pure light.

Just like the Academy, Dallion muttered.

I wouldn't know. Pierce pulled a curtain segment aside. Please.

A small altar slightly bigger than a water fountain became visible in the center. Wider than the awakening ones Dallion had seen, it was composed of familiar hexagonal prisms, although the

central part was missing, as if someone had removed its heart long ago. To compensate, the hex prisms around it were not six, but twelve, each in a different shade.

Thats the Sun Orders altar? Dallion asked, refusing to believe it.

Magnificent, isnt it? Pierce asked. Its what separates us from the Academy, the Order of the Seven Moons, or everyone else in the world. We have the worlds only skill altar.

The name alone was enough to impress anyone. If what was claimed turned out to be true, this was the only object that would allow a person to increase their skills at a rapid pace merely by completing shrine trials. No wonder a minor religion had formed around it. Being able to grow at such a degree was as miraculous as the standard awakening altars themselves.

Whats the limit? Dallion asked.

The limit you are born with, Astra said, effectively suggesting that there was none. The only requirement is that you already have the traits. Other than that, the principle is the same. If youre strong enough to defeat the creatures it sends your way you get to improve.

In his mind, Dallion could almost see it now a wide field, similar to an arena, surrounded by a ring of a hundred arches. With enough skill and dedication, one could go far. Of course, if it was like any of the other altars, asking for help was also possible. That was the real reason members brought their children to acquire skills that they otherwise wouldnt.

By the Moons, I did not expect that, dear boy, Adzorg admitted. It would have saved me so many troubles growing up.

It would have saved many people a lot of trouble, Dallion replied.

The existence of this altar virtually guaranteed that anyone in the capital could instantly be transformed into a nine-skill awakened. Hundred-level skills alone werent enough to defeat someone with high traits, but in large numbers they were perfect for creating armies. All of a sudden, the Azures didnt seem like the greatest threat in the world. Rather, it was the emperor.

And caused just as many problems, Adzorg continued. I can understand why the Order of the Twelve keeps it hidden, but still. I was the archmage for Moons sake!

Yes, you were an archmage, but were never invited.

Well, I gather the emperor had a good reason. Anyway, what are you thinking? Ready to give it a try and boost those incomplete skills of yours?

That was definitely a good idea, but in the present circumstances, it wasnt going to be enough. Against a force such as this, Dallion would need more.

Im thinking I need an awakening altar of my own, he said.