

## Leveling up 881

Chapter 881: Harp's Story - Ferocity

### MEMORY FRAGMENT

#### Nymph Capital Sorgente, Nymphs Era

The death of Prince Astrea came as no surprise. His condition had been deteriorating steadily for the last few years, most of which he hadn't been seen in public. As was tradition, the news was announced in every corner of the kingdom. However, it was another event that gathered a lot more attention than the death of princess Tiallia. The miraculous awakening that had taken place four months ago had transformed her into an entirely different person. Timidness and uncertainty had been replaced by inquisitiveness and determination.

In just under a month she had become an inspiration for the younger generation, doing what even seasoned veterans couldn't. There was talk that she had already passed the third awakening gate and had a higher magic trait than anyone in the kingdom. What no one but a select few knew, was that the so-called miraculous changes were because she had become host to an otherworlder.

Five down, Giaccia thought, looking at her sister fighting behind the protective wall of water.

To this day she had mixed feelings on the matter. She was fully aware that her sister had performed the awakening of her own free will. It was a huge risk, and for all intents and purposes it hadn't panned out. The person Tia had become shared her appearance, her memories, in some aspects even her thoughts, yet she wasn't her. Scholars remained divided on the subject, but as far as Giaccia was concerned, her sister had died in the awakening chamber months ago.

Look, carefully, King Cial said. That's what you should aim for. Remember, you're heir now.

Yes, Father. Giaccia nodded.

It was easier said than done. Tia had made a lot of progress in a very short amount of time, and although her combat skills left a lot to be desired, her magic was on an entirely different level. Even the royal mages were hesitant to teach her, out of fear that she might surpass them in a matter of years.

She's taking too long, Giaccia's uncle grumbled. Relying too much on magic is almost as bad as having none at all.

He had toned down his desire to inherit the crown, though that didn't mean he had completely given up.

In the hall, Tia created a ball of fire which she hurled at one of the remaining water golems. The construct fizzled out of existence in a cloud of steam.

Giaccia crossed her arms. She could tell her sister was doing it deliberately. If she wanted, she could have completed the trial in half the time. Instead, she had chosen to prolong it, making sure that Giaccia's record held.

With each spell, the water golems diminished by one, until finally there were none left. As the last one evaporated, the water wall fell into the floor, revealing the throne section.

The first thing that Tia did was to glance at Giaccia for approval, and Giaccia was quick to give it to her in the form of a nod. Otherworlder or not, she was the closest thing to her sister the world had to offer.

Well done, the ruler said along with a slow clap. Not that it was a challenge.

Giaccia noted that unlike during her trial, there was no mention of Tiallia not being the heir.

You could have finished faster. Why didnt you?

I wanted to show you my magic, Father, the princess replied. Theres already one fighter in the family.

The comment caused a few smiles. Everyone could see it for what it wasan acknowledgement of Giaccias strength and rightful place within the family.

Maybe youll tell me more during our opera, King Cial waved his fingers, ordering the servants to quickly restore the throne room to its normal appearance.

This was also Giaccias cue to leave. Unlike her sister, she hadnt been offered to stay. Leaving the fuss behind her, Giaccia left the throne room. Recent events had made her feel out of place. With her brother dead and her sister passing her trial, she felt more alone than ever.

No congratulations? a voice asked behind her.

Giaccia looked over her shoulder. To her surprise, Tiallia was there.

Wasnt that long ago that I congratulated you in this very spot, the younger nymph said.

Instinctively, Giaccia gritted her teeth. She hated when the otherworlder used her sisters memories. It was always very subtle, small remarks here and there, all aimed at creating the illusion that the old Tia was still present.

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It was further away, Giaccia said. Arent you supposed to be with father and mother?

Why do you think Im not? A smirk formed on Tias face, completely out of place. One mes there looking at our glorious past and one me is here talking with you. Simple.

Im sure its simple. Giaccia caused the water of her clothes to ripple. Congratulations, Tia. Youve far surpassed me. Theres nothing keeping you from the throne.

Is that what you think? That Im aiming for the throne? She came closer. Youll get the throne. I promised you that. Not this throne, though.

Not this throne?

Come. Tiallia reached out, offering her hand. Lets go see brother.

See brother? Was this a threat? At this distance, Giaccia held a slight advantage. Her speed was greater than that of her sister, although there was no

telling whether the real person was standing in front of her or just a copy created through magic.

It'll be all right, the other smiled. I swear by the Moons.

There could be no doubt about it now a Moon vow couldn't be broken. And yet, doubt still lingered.

Trust me on this, Tia said.

Despite her fears, Giaccia took hold of her sister's hand. The moment she did, a portal formed beneath them. A flash of purple later, the two were standing in front of the royal burial marker. It was tradition that all nymphs returned to the ocean upon death. Only markers commemorating their lives were left behind.

I thought that mages could only get to Galateas Square, Giaccia whispered.

The area was utterly empty. Few ever came here when they didn't have to. No one wanted to be reminded where they'd end up. Ignoring that fact, the place was nice, even relaxing. Up till now, Giaccia had never noticed.

See? I told you you could trust me. Tiallia smiled.

A strong gust of wind passed through the burial ground—the first sign of an upcoming storm.

I used to come here a lot as a child, Tiallia continued. Before my awakening, this was the only place I didn't have to see the pity and disgust in those looking at me. She took a few steps to the royal burial marker. You were the one exception.

You're lying. Mother

I've lied about many things, but not about that, the other interrupted. We both know I've been pretending to be someone I'm not. Or, rather, I'm someone who is more than what I was. Because I'm an otherworlder you think that I replaced your sister, don't you?

Yes. Giaccia wasn't afraid to say. But you also became what she dreamed of being.

See? That's why I like you. I won't lie, I don't know what I am. I have two pasts, one here, one far away in another world. I know everything Tiallia's been through. Even now I share some of her emotions just as I share those of my other self. Do you know the funniest thing of all? We also share the same name.

I don't see what that has to do with anything, Giaccia thought.

It's no secret that the kingdom is in decline. This has been so ever since the heroic deeds of the last major war. I'd like to say that were unique, but it's a common occurrence. Those who've seen war never want to see it again. Those who have no memory of war have no love of peace. Our father, like most of the nymphs here, loves reading about our past, thinking how far we've come while ignoring the kingdom crumbling around him.

Careful.

Why? Because Im telling the truth? Tiallia tapped the side of the burial marker with a flick of her finger. A spiderweb of cracks emerged, spreading until it had covered half of the marble block. Im not saying this to piss you off. Ive found a solution.

The cracks in the marble vanished.

There are two ways to remove rust. Either polish the metal to the point of breaking, or bring it through fire.

Youre saying that this kingdom needs fire? As much as Giaccia disliked the idea, she couldnt suppress the spark of yearningthe desire for battle she had experienced when facing the thunder fury.

All of them do. The nymphs have grown complacent, isolating themselves in their small bubbles of water in the ocean.

A vision appeared. Giaccia was no longer sure if it was occurring in her own mind or her sister was using a spell to make it manifest. The vision showed all nymph kingdoms shedding all their waste and uniting as one. That was a throne worth sitting on; that was the future that Tiallia had promised.

How do we make it happen? she asked.

Slowly at first, the other smiled. And with a bit of help.

In the next few months, a series of events took place, each rocking the kingdom more than the previous. The first came in the form of an unexpected war with the nymph kingdom of Bellucia. In many aspects the country was similar to Icestream, though with a less glorious history. There didnt seem to be any apparent reason for the hostilities. Both kingdoms had isolated themselves, only attacking people that invaded their domains. Having them attack and sink one of Icestreams ice cities came as a shock that needed a response. All the kingdoms forces were sent into battle, with a small contingent remaining to protect the king and queen. Initially, both princesses were to remain there as well, but at the last moment it had been decided that Giaccia take lead of the armies.

The entire war was surprisingly short and bloody. Ignoring the enemys outer cities, Giaccia had gone straight for Bellucias capital. For the first time since generations nymphs clashed against nymphs on a major scale in what became known as the Two Moon War. It was said that the sight of combat had been so grotesque that only the Red and Purple Moon had remained in the sky to observe. Thirty-two days later, the Bellucia kingdom was no more. The capital had been utterly destroyed, merging into the ocean along with everyone in it. All remaining cities had quickly switched allegiance, doubling the size of Icestreams territory.

That was only the beginning. Several months later, the same thing happened again. Alarmed by the aggressive nature of Icestream, another kingdom had declared war, and lost just as quickly.

An air of change swept through the inhabitants. No longer content with their comfortable but pointless existence, they joined the ranks of the awakened, looking forward to the inevitable battles to come.

Giaccia kept on leading the kingdoms armies, bringing one victory after another. Each time she returned to her capital more and more crowds cheered. That was not all. All the external battles had driven her to succeed in her awakening trials as well. Already past her fourth gate, the necessity of quick improvement had made her speed past the fifth gate and keep on going. Soon enough, her

level was greater than anyone else in the kingdom except for her father. Then, it exceeded his as well.

After six consecutive victories, King Cial abdicated the throne in favor of his daughter. A grand announcement was made, and even half a dozen bishops from the Order of the Seven Moons were present to witness the event. With that, the time of kingdoms had ended, replaced by that of the true nymph empire.

Chapter 882: Harp's Story - Foresight

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Nymph Capital Sorgente, Nymphs Era**

Three more kingdoms requested to join the empire. One of them even went so far as to sink their own capital. It had become standard for every conquered territory to go through this unequivocal sign that there was only one power to rule all cities.

Standing in the empty throne room, Giaccia sighed. With the era of the empire close at hand, her days as a warrior were numbered. Her throne, cherished and desired by so many, seemed like a cage.

You really should live a little, Tiallia said, appearing a step away.

Since passing the fifth gate, her magic had exceeded everyones expectations, capable of feats only described in legends. The only reason she hadn't single-handedly destroyed the other nymph kingdoms was because of the laws of the Moon while in their domains, domain rulers held more power than any mage, so it was up to Giaccia to do the conquering.

Did the servants annoy you again? The mage empress looked around.

The servants never annoyed me, Giaccia thought. It was other things that did. Most of all, though, it was the rise of politics. When no one particularly valued life in the kingdom, politics had been reduced to Giaccias uncle pestering the king about being made official heir. Now, things were different. The entire court was packed with schemers, trading favors for strength which they used to gain more favors. Tiallia seemed to thrive on that; not because she had to engage in it, but because she found it amusing.

Three more asked to join, Giaccia said, telling information her sister undoubtedly knew.

Six, Tiallia corrected.

Six Giaccia repeated. If there's anyone left, they are running or hiding. Either way, there won't be any more wars.

Aww, is that what's bothering you? Tiallia laughed. That you can't go fighting? Well, don't worry. That will soon change.

A patch of darkness appeared on the floor a few steps away. Instinctively, Giaccia drew her rapier, but her sister gave her a sign to calm down. The patch grew more and more until it was three feet in diameter. Then, it started trickling upwards forming the silhouette of a being. Once fully formed, the being gained texture, revealing it to be a male human. He seemed to be in his late thirties,

although humans always looked older than they were, scarred and scruffy. His clothes were unlike anything Giaccia had ever seen, but definitely not something she found attractive.

Id like you to introduce you to someone, Tiallia said. Hes an otherworlder just like me.

Hi, the human waved his hand, his expression as cheerful as if he was being strangled by an octopus.

You have to forgive him. Hes not much for etiquette, but he can definitely help us. You see, hes the Crying Star.

The Star?! This time Giaccia fully drew her sword. She knew perfectly well what the Star was. Talking to him was bad enough, but bringing him to the throne room that was disastrous.

The water around the Stars feet rose up, instantly hardening. Without hesitation, Giaccia rushed forward, piercing the creature right through the chest. Before the Star could react, she continued with a multi-attack creating several dozen holes in his body, then went on to carve off his limbs and head. Body parts fell on the floor with a splash, reverting to black liquid again.

Sis, Tiallia said, casting a spell that made Giaccia freeze in place. Dont be so rude to our guest. As I said, hes here to help us. Rather, hes here to help you.

Tia? Giaccia thought, unable to move her body. This wasnt a spell she was familiar with. Of course, she could easily use her domain ruler powers to continue her attack, although was it going to do any good? Even now, the black blotches were merging back to the silhouette remains, rebuilding it as before.

Forgive her for that, Tiallia said in an apologetic tone. Shes always been a bit hot blooded.

No prob, the Stars face reformed. I get that a lot.

Giaccia, will you promise to behave? Tiallia looked at her.

In her current condition, the nymph was incapable of moving her lips to reply.

I promise, she thought. That proved to be enough, for the spell was instantly loosened, returning her control of her body. Curious, Giaccia put her weapon away. She didnt like this in the least, yet it was clear she was expected to go through with it.

How? she asked despite her reluctance. How can you help us?

Simple, the Star replied. Ill help you take over the world.

The words felt like venom on lightning. They held just enough allure to make Giaccia feel intrigued and ignore the obvious threats. In all of history there had only been one attempt to conquer the world, ending in the banishment of an entire race. The scars left behind were so deep that no race even considered making another attempt. Although, if someone were to do so, now would be the perfect time. Of the six remaining races, the Moon of exceptions favored the nymphs.

See? Tiallia laughed. I told you shed be open to the idea.

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Doesnt look that way to me. the Star narrowed his eyes.

She hasnt tried to kill you a second time.

How? Giaccia ended the suspense. We dont have enough mages to take on all remaining races.

You will if you take them one at a time. The Star spat on the floor.

A black dot appeared there, quickly growing until it formed a map of the known world. Giaccia quickly recognized the empires territory. As impressive as it felt, it was nothing but a small sliver of what there was to offer.

Its said that there are four major kingdoms that rule the world, the Star continued. Thats a lie. The wilderness covers most of the world. But unlike you, I cant conquer on my own.

That much was true. All the teachings stated that Star could corrupt and contort, but never conquer outright.

As long as I create a bit of panic on the continent all eyes will be focused there. Thats when you strike and take out your greatest threat.

An interesting proposal. From personal experience, Giaccia would classify the furies as the nymphs greatest threat, but she hadnt had any contact with the remaining races. The humans were weak, that much was obvious, but there was no telling how much of an obstacle the dryads and gorgons would be.

Afterwards we pick one each and team up on the last one.

Just like that? Giaccia looked at him.

You want a ten-page PowerPoint? he snapped at her.

A what?

There's no need to get agitated, Tiallia intervened in a calm but firm fashion. We all share the same goals.

Do we? Giaccias fingers itched for the rapier. The Star is the bane of existence. Why would we trust anything he says? Why would he offer to help us with nothing in return?

Oh, but there is something he wants. Two things, rather.

There was a moment of silence.

Go ahead. He waved his hand. Youll say it better.

In exchange for his assistance, well stop destroying cracklings and other void creatures, Tiallia said. I have assurances that they wont cause any trouble.

The Star shrugged, hardly interested. For someone who was looking forward to this alliance, he wasnt selling it.

And the second? Giaccia turned to her sister.

If you manage to take over the world you release me from my chains. The Star suddenly decided to take the initiative. You get what you want, I get to do anything I wish. No more Moon laws, no more restrictions.

How exactly do you think we can manage that? Giaccia crossed her arms. Were not Moons.

If you conquer the world, you will be. A crooked smile formed on the humans face. Have you ever wondered how the Moons became the Moons? Even they follow the laws of awakening. They look all over the races, granting them powers, yet even they cannot do anything they want.

The sixth gate, Tiallia spelled it out. Hes talking about the sixth gate.

Once you grow your domain to cover the entire world, youll have enough to reach the sixth awakening gate. Walk through that, and the eighth Moon will be born.

That was it? Giaccia had indeed wondered whether there was a sixth gate. The scholars claimed that there was, the Order of the Seven Moons insisted that it was unreachable by mortals. If the Star wasnt lying, no wonder that the copyettes had made an attempt. If one were to become a Moon, their power would be unimaginable.

Youre not tempted to become a Moon yourself?

I told you. The star Snorted. I cant conquer. Besides, theres no participation prize in world conquest. If you fail, you get banished along with the rest of your race.

And you get to ask the next awakened with ambitions.

The Stars angle was clearhe had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Even so, Giaccia didnt trust him. The proper thing was to refuse the offer and have nothing to do with him. Even better, she could try to kill him before her sister intervened. Sadly, the seed of temptation had already been planted.

There were no debates, no discussions. A few minutes later, the deal was struck. The Star was going to support them from the shadows, while the nymph empire gobbled up all remaining cities in the world. There was only one minor detailin order to reach the level required, only one could rule over the world. Given her war experience, Giaccia was the reasonable choice. She had the will and combat experience. Her sister, despite her magic skill, was a more behind-the-scenes person.

Both expected Giaccia to take on the role. Both expected her to, but in the very last moment she chose differently, swearing loyalty to her sister. From that moment, the decision was made.

One month later, the nymph empire went inland. The recent chainling sightings had caused a minor dryad kingdom to divert its attention elsewhere, so they were completely off guard. It wasnt a grand victory, but allowed the nymphs to move inland. Each following month, their territory would expand more and more until the remaining powers in the world were forced to form a union in an attempt to stop the upcoming threat. Then, just as the nymphs victory seemed assured, a human envoy came to visit, directly from the Orders grand citadel.

No one knew what the bishop wanted, nor how he had managed to get to Sorgente. He didnt fight, didnt even try to resist when the guards cast containment spells on him. The only thing he did was



to say he wanted to talk to the empress and her sister. An hour later, he was brought to the imperial throne room.

Two thrones, the man said. He was rather plump, dark-skinned, with enough scars to make it clear he had seen a fair share of combat. I never expected it to be true.

You're a long way from home, bishop. Tiallia took the initiative. What do you want?

What do I want? The man looked around.

You said you wanted to talk to both of us.

That's true, majesties. Both of you, no one else.

Giaccia could feel the tension in the room rise. There were over a hundred guards and servants present far more than their parents kept during their reign. Every soldier had sworn to give their life protecting the empress and her sister. It was also true that the pair were arguably the strongest beings in the awakened world.

Go, Tiallia ordered.

Within seconds, all other nymphs sunk into the floor. Only three people were left in the throne room.

Now, say what you've come to say.

With pleasure. The bishop took a deep breath. The archbishop has prophesied that the Star will betray you. Two weeks from now, when you need him to create a distraction against the fury mountain stronghold, he won't appear.

Is that so? Tiallia narrowed her eyes.

Most definitely. The resulting defeat will be rather significant, causing you to lose the initiative and start your slow defeat. Eleven months later, in your desperation, you'll make one final attempt to gain what you've lost. The attempt will be unsuccessful. You and your entire race will be banished, just like the copyettes were.

Giaccia felt chills through her body. Her first reaction was to dismiss it as a lie. Even if they weren't able to conquer the rest of the world, there was hardly a reason for them to be banished. Or was there? Tiallia had assured her that she'd taken every precaution. The nymphs rarely were the ones to initiate any attack, they left others to do it for them. Yet, there wasn't a note of deceit in the bishop's words.

An interesting story. Tiallia retained her composure. It reminds me of the Order's assurances that my brother would recover.

The archbishop is aware of your situation, but the facts remain.

Facts? Giaccia struggled not to shout. You haven't said any facts! Just a lot of nonsense you claim are prophecies.

In that case, let me give a specific one for you. Tonight, just as all seven Moons have filled the sky, one of the human kingdoms will offer you an alliance. Their only request will be that you spare their lives now and in future. Oh, and they would have already made a Moon vow to serve you.

Chapter 883: Harp's Story - Forsaken

## MEMORY FRAGMENT

### Nymph Capital Sorgente, Nymphs Era

The archbishops prophecy came to pass. One of the insignificant human kingdoms had sent a messenger to the nymphs land cities, requesting that they be spared destruction. They were willing to face any consequences and had made a Moon vow to that effect.

Concerned by the coincidence, Giaccia had personally gone to question the bishop, but found that he was no longer there. None of the guards knew anything, no one had seen him it was as if the man had vanished into thin air, leaving nothing but a scroll behind. On it were another two prophecies as well as an instruction that should they need more, it was upon them to visit the archbishop in the Orders grand citadel.

Convinced it was a ploy of some sort, Giaccia punished the guards, then pretended to give the matter no further thought. There were battles to be won, and a minor disruption of such nature was no reason to put the war effort on hold. Her sister, though, wasnt of the same opinion.

A month later, once the remaining two prophecies had occurred, Tiallia left the empires capital. No one knew where she went, but Giaccia had a pretty good idea. After several weeks, the princess returned. From that point on, prophecies started coming in.

Be careful when you take Meghena, Tiallia said. Its an ambush. Theyll surrender the city, then attack it from the outside.

I know how to fight, Giaccia replied in a sharp tone.

I know you do, but there are things you cant foresee.

What did you agree to give him? The Order doesnt just send prophecies for no reason.

Does it matter? They are helping us.

The archbishop could be organizing all that. The Order has its fingers in many kingdoms. Thinking about it, it had a presence in every kingdom that the empire had conquered so far. More significantly, somehow the bishops had the foresight to leave the capitals prior to conquest.

He could have. Which is why I went to see him.

It was a mistake.

No, it wasnt. Tiallias tone hardened. He gave me a lot of insight.

That the Star cant be trusted? I could have told you that.

He told me a lot more than the Stars betrayal. Up to now, most of his prophecies have come true. There was a moment of evasiveness as she spoke. Giaccia noticed it, but decided not to press. Things were getting tense, either way. When the two had started this, it was to change the world. Now, there was no telling whether they were of the same mind.

Seeing that there was no point in arguing, Giaccia focused on the fighting. Tiallia must have continued with her dealings, since letters from the Order kept on pouring in. What was more, syllablighs were used to ensure that no one could read the contents of those letters; no one except for Tiallia.

Then, the Stars betrayal happened. Giaccia had been so certain that she had been prepared. There were enough armies placed at the right places with the right equipment. Capturing the fury stronghold was supposed to be a breeze. However, it quickly turned out that all the information the nymphs had received was false. The mighty stronghold was occupied by less than a hundred soldiers, all fully aware that they were sacrificing their lives. The real enemy forces had taken advantage of the movement of troops to attack a series of undefended cities in the rear of the nymph empire. On their own, none of the cities constituted a major loss. Taken together, though, they had crippled Giaccias advancement plans and put their hold of the continent at risk. The only solution was to retreat and consolidate.

Tiallias response was mind-boggling. When Giaccia returned to the capital to bring her the news in person, she found her sister destroying Galateas statue.

Tia? Giaccia asked. The only reason she wasnt shouting was because of the people present. There was no need to give further credence to the rumors of discord between the two. Whats going on?

The archbishop needs Moonstones for adequate prophecies, the other explained, not even looking in Giaccias direction. This was faster than sending out hunts for them.

Destroying the state of Galatea?

A sacrifice, I know, but given our current situation, a necessary one.

Theres no way thats necessary, Giaccia thought.

Is there something you needed? Tia glanced at her sister for the first time. This requires precision on my part.

Yes, Giaccia replied in a calm fashion. Deep inside, she was boiling, but on the exterior she was as calm as a rippleless lake. Id like to have a conversation with you in private.

With a snap of her fingers, Tiallia surrounded both of them with an aether bubble. A moment later, the bubble turned opaque purple.

So? Tiallia crossed her arms.

We lost.

Please tell me you didnt want to tell me just that.

What more proof do you want not to trust the Order? Its just like with our brother. They assured you that their prophecies will bring you victory. We still got betrayed by the Star, not that there was ever any doubt. We still lost the continent. We should be engaging them and instead

My dear, silly, big sister, Tiallia laughed. Always so focused on the practical. We had already lost months ago. The first prophecy the bishop brought holds true. There was no going around that. Did you think I was wasting my time trying to prevent it?

Giaccia didnt say a word, staring at her sister in disbelief.

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I maintained this relationship for two reasons. The archbishops prophecy said that I can win. He just didnt say when. She moved closer to Giaccia. Also, this was the only way I could ensure your survival.

My what? Giaccias eyes widened.

The battle that you lost, the one you just came back from. Originally, you were supposed to die there. Overconfident in your abilities, you would lead the charge and be ambushed. I'd destroy the city, of course. I'd even destroy a quarter of the remaining kingdoms, but ultimately, I'd be defeated. This way I have an alternative.

Giaccia looked away. Despite hearing the truth in Tiallias words, she still found the whole story unbelievable. Awakened powers allowed people to do many things that were deemed impossible, but could prophecy be one of them? It was said that even the Moons couldn't see the future. If so, how could a mere mortal?

I've thought about this. Tiallia placed her hands on Giaccias shoulders. You can trust me.

Whether or not she was telling the truth remained debatable. For almost a year later the unthinkable happened. After losing almost the whole of the continent, Giaccia and her armies had just started making new gains when an event like none other took place.

Giaccia suddenly felt her surroundings disappear, consumed by purple. It wasn't a case of a spell or aether bubble appearing. She could feel a barrier inserting itself between her and reality.

## **BANISHMENT**

### **You have been removed from the world.**

A yellow rectangle appeared before her eyes. There could no longer be any doubt the event that Giaccia had dreaded had come to pass. It felt very different from what she had imagined. When reading the historical tomes as a child, she had on occasion wondered what the copyettes had felt. She had also wondered what could cause the most powerful race to suffer such a fate. Now she knew the answer to both of those questions, and they seemed disappointingly mundane.

Gia. A voice rippled in the purple nothingness.

A tear within it appeared, revealing Giaccias sister.

Tia? Giaccia reached out to her, but an invisible barrier stopped her hand.

Don't, the other said. You'll break the pattern.

Pattern?

Remember when I told you I'll take care of you? Now's the time to prove it.

A bit difficult now that we're banished, Giaccia thought. Nonetheless, she was grateful. She wasn't alone in the nothingness, which probably couldn't be said for many others.

We'll have to be banished for a while, but I've arranged for you to return to the world as an item guardian.

Arranged? Giaccia wondered. What came out of her mouth, though, was. Item guardian?

With your skills, you'll still be able to see the world around you.

Tia, I dont

Not now! her sister interrupted. We dont have long. Take the time as an item to learn all that you can. Learn about the world, about your owners, about the changes that take place. It might be a while before we see each other again, but when I come back, well finish what we started.

Wait! How before Gia was done, she was ripped out of the nothingness and into a large silver room.

The interior was very similar to what her chambers in the nymph palace had been, though considerably smaller.

**SHIELD BLADE level 1 created.**

**You are the SHIELD BLADE guardian.**

**Your new class is SHADOW**

**Your new level is 100**

Rectangles appeared in the air. Giaccia waved them away and quickly went to the window. To her relief, there was a world to be seen outside. After a few moments, though, she quickly saw that it was an awakened realm. Beyond a certain distance, the landscape repeated, continuing with its sameness all the way to the horizon.

Only now did everything start to sink in. This wasnt a dream or illusion. Giaccia wasnt part of the world at least not in the same sense as before. The nymph empire had fallen, the race was banished, and Giaccia was the guardian of a shield blade, of all things.

The only speck of comfort was that she was the guardian of a weapon. Could it be that her sister had arranged that as well?

Hello? Giaccia said. There was nothing to suggest that the item was linked to a person, but from experience she knew that she had to have an owner. Shield blades didnt come into existence just like that. Hello!

**ARN LEGRAND has linked the realm to his.**

Great. Giaccia sighed. Naturally, it had to be a dwarf.

Then again, maybe that wasnt such a bad thing. The nymphs hadnt gotten to taking on many of the dwarf kingdoms yet, so there wouldnt be too much animosity towards her. Of course, that would be if the dwarf would even respond to her.

It quickly became clear that her owner didnt have the empathy trait. Thus, talking to him was as useful as petting a porcupine.

For the next few centuries, Giaccia learned what it was like to be an item guardian. The dwarf turned out to be a hunter, so he made good use of his weapon. Even so, his actions were slow and sloppy in comparison to what the nymph was used to. She couldnt help herself but to correct his strikes, making the attacks more lethal. Soon enough the weapon she was guardian of became known for its lust for blood, and she as a combat guardian.

The dwarf passed the shield sword to his son, who then passed it to his daughter, continuing the tradition of hunters. Unfortunately, in the prime of her life, she came upon a creature she wasnt able

to defeat a dragon. The fight had been quick the dwarf hadn't felt a thing. In the process, Giaccias item had snapped, taking her back to the purple void. Hardly had she done so than she was pulled into an entirely new item. This time it was a noble's saber. Apparently, as part of her sister's arrangement she was to be moved to a new item the instant her current one was destroyed.

The next seventeen years, she was the proud possession of an energetic, but spoiled baron's son. The experience was tiring and filled with more showing off and petty duels than actual fighting. The owner had no regard for his items, so it came as no surprise that he snapped the saber in an attempt to force a door open.

Centuries and eras came and went. Through dozens of owners, Giaccia witnessed the fall of the dryads' attempt and the start of the human age. Each time her item would break, she hoped that it would mark her sister's promised return, and each time she was wrong. The experience made her more and more bitter, vengeful against the world and everyone in it. All the items she was guardian of quickly acquired a reputation of being cursed or bloodthirsty. Although still plagued by her fragile nature, Giaccia yearned for battle, finding that only it managed to keep her thoughts at bay.

Then, millennia later, she acquired an owner that changed her existence to its core.

Chapter 884: Harp's Story - Forgiven

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Tamin Capital, Age of Humans**

A harp's sword? Giaccia looked at the blue rectangle.

That was something new. Not a weapon she particularly appreciated. Artistic weapons required more than perfect mastery in two skills. In most cases she had seen, their owners didn't have them, resulting in a quick death for the person or the item.

### **LYRA ELAZNI has linked the realm to hers.**

Giaccia took a few minutes to get acquainted with her new home. It obviously had a female touch elegant but simple. It had no wasted space, but just enough comfort to make the strictness cozy. There were no obvious flaws one could tell, confirming that the creator was skilled, apart from having an eye for detail.

The scene outside was remarkable as well. For one thing, there was a lot more water than Giaccia was used to. That was one of the things she still missed. Nearly all of her owners were rather unimaginative, constructing their realms to be fortresses of stone or wood, but in all cases, they avoided any large bodies of water. Ironical that it would be a human to provide what so many others hadn't.

Taking advantage of the linked realms, Giaccia left her item's representation, venturing to the owner's skill walls. In the past, this was the point she would be stopped by a few overenthusiastic echoes who made it clear she wasn't free to roam the realm as she chose. To her surprise, there wasn't a single echo to be seen. What there was, though, were a lot of creatures.

A few gave her a momentary glance, though more interested in her item's structure than the nymph herself. That was good, although part of Giaccia would have wished to get some recognition.

The skill walls turned out to be in a marble building of gorgon-like architecture. Back in her time, Giaccia would have called it barbaric, but at this point, she had seen far worse. All twelve walls were covered with frames, indicating that the owner was quite proficient.

Full skills, Giaccia thought.

That said, the spellcrafting presence was severely limited, very much like her own.

Liking what you see? a voice asked behind her.

Giaccia, of course, had sensed the owner entering the realm. Yet, she hadn't expected to be addressed in her own language, be it with an extremely thick accent.

You're an empath. Giaccia briefly glanced over her shoulder before moving to examine another skill wall. This one was music and had by far the most frames on it.

And you're clearly a veteran. The human walked up next to her.

Back in the day, Giaccia would have attacked if only to test the human's strength. The rules of the Moons forbade it. As an item, she couldn't invade a personal realm, not to mention that she was linked to it, making her subservient.

You're the first guardian to enter my domain uninvited, the human said.

I'll get back to my shell. Giaccia started turning around, but was instantly stopped.

I didn't say it was a bad thing, just unusual.

As you said, I'm a veteran. I've seen a lot. She offered a semi-smile. I expect you've come to challenge me to an upgrade?

You really have seen a lot.

Anyone with half a mind would have figured it out, Giaccia thought. There was no other reason for an awakened to enter their realm so soon after the creation of a new weapon. These were the rare breed of people who wanted to maximize their potential from the get-go. Of course, this one was going to be disappointed, just like all the ones who had tried before.

You're not even trying to hide your pain, the human continued. There's layers of it, one atop the other. That's something you have built up for a long time.

How much do you know about item guardians? Giaccia asked.

Not much, the other admitted.

Then I can't tell you.

Lyra Elazni laughed. It was a normal, cheerful laugh without pretense or spite. Thanks to her own music skills, Giaccia could see the blobs of genuine happiness within the human.

There's no point in hiding then, Giaccia said. You'll try to do something about it, then fail and never talk to me again.

Sounds like you're talking from experience?

Giaccia didnt reply.

Alright then.

The walls of the structure moved apart from one another, splitting the entire building. Rays of sunlight shone through, covering the ground as it stretched beneath Giaccias feet. A thick layer of stone suddenly appeared, also stretching outwards.

Im not one to disappoint, the human said, as a vast battle arena formed. If I defeat you, Ill expect something in return.

A golden flutterblade flew down from above, landing on the womans shoulder. That was the annoying thing about empathsthey relied on others with greater strength to win their battles. A bit like magic, some might say.

And if I win? the nymphs asked. Do I get to be free?

Only a Moon can grant you that. Still, youll have the satisfaction knowing you proved me wrong.

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### **COMBAT INITIATED**

Giaccia dashed forward. There was no point in delaying this the faster this could be settled, the faster she would be left alone.

Water emerged in the nymphs palm, quickly forming a rapier. Dozens of attack markers had already appeared, depicting possible attack points with follow-ups. Giaccia was moments away from victory, and yet her opponent didnt budge a muscle.

It was obvious that the flutterblade would intervene, but Giaccia had already taken that into account. The moment it budged, shed form another rapier with her left hand and deflect its attacks, while continuing to the main target.

The human suddenly summoned a weapon. The action was just as fast as Giaccias, only instead of a sword, a lyre appeared in her hands. With merciless precision, Lyra played a chord.

Dozens of music threads shot out towards Giaccia. Knowing the effect theyd have, the nymph slashed at them. Yet, instead of snapping, the threads linked to the weapon, sending an intense wave of emotions. Pain and bitterness, bottled up for years, poured out all at once, causing her to freeze. Horrors she never wished shed relive went through her mind, creating images so real that it was like she had been transported into the past.

### **FATAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 500%**

### **FATAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 500%**

Red rectangles stacked up, but the nymph barely focused, still prisoner to her own pain. Then everything vanished, replaced by a bright green.

### **IMPROVEMENT**



**You have been defeated.**

**The HARPSISWORD level has increased!**

**Your level has increased to 101!**

Giaccia felt a calm warmth pass through her body, sweeping away most of the pain. For a single moment, she felt peace, calm, joy emotions she hadn't felt since she was a child.

The sensation quickly faded away, barely lingering behind as she was thrown back into Lyra's realm. Everything seemed the same, everything except Giaccia.

So, the woman began with a smile on her face. What do we do now?

The lyra remained in her hand, indicating she was ready for another round, should the nymph guardian choose. Given how one-sided the fight was, there wouldn't be much of a point. A single level, even so high up, wouldn't make a difference.

I've never seen music be used like that. Giaccia dissolved her rapier.

You're lying. The other laughed. I'm just very, very good at it. It also helped that you were effectively fighting against yourself. When I said you had layers of pain, it wasn't to spite you. I just pulled a few off and look what happened.

Layers of pain, Giaccia thought. Even now, the pleasant sensation of moments ago had all but faded. If she felt better, it was by a purely academic definition.

The ground rumbled. The layer of rock dissolved, followed by the skill walls moving back together again. They didn't seem to be in a hurry, as if the domain ruler wanted to enjoy the realm's sunshine a bit more.

Since I won, I expect something from you. Lyra made her way to the guardian. Unless you wish for us to go through this again.

Just say it. There was no point in even trying.

I want you to let me peel the pain away, the woman said, to Giaccia's surprise. It won't be fast and it won't be pleasant, but I can do it.

You're so confident in your skills?

Definitely.

The harpsisword guardian thought for a few moments.

Why? My efficiency won't increase. It might even fall if I become calmer. Why go through it?

Because I'm selfish. My skills let me constantly see the pain of others and I don't want to, especially in my own domain. Once I invite someone here, I make sure to remove it, no matter what. She petted the flutterblade on her shoulder. Especially when dealing with things I like.

From that point on, the long process of healing began. At times, the experience was so painful that one could barely call it healing, but since Giaccia had given her word, she gritted her teeth through it. Finally, after decades of real time effort, there came a day when she felt free. Thanks to Lyra Elaznis effort, the past reluctantly released Giaccia from its clutches, allowing her to take a new

step in her existence. A new being was born, one living in the present, thankful and loyal to her new owner. Sadly, time in the real world remained just as harsh and, like a blink of the eye, Lyra had passed away. It had been a grand event, suitable for the Tamin Empires second empress.

The harpsisword was passed on to her heirs, who were also skilled in music, though nowhere nearly as much as Lyra. Still, Giaccia assisted them as if they were her original owner. Some were kinder than others, some were even confident enough to challenge her, yet their efforts proved fruitless, until the day a determined girl managed to repeat the impossible.

## **IMPROVEMENT**

**You have been defeated.**

**The HARPSISWORD level has increased!**

**Your level has increased to 102!**

It had been a close call, not to mention that her owner was using several artifacts to boost her abilities, yet there was no denying the result. A win was a win.

Not bad, the nymph guardian said. Of course, my first owner defeated me with nothing but music.

Yeah, right. Viara Elazni lay breathing heavily on the ground. Technically the victor, she felt as if a herd of hedgerels had run over her. And she probably did it without breaking a sweat.

The guardian just smiled. There was no point in souring the girls victory. Summoning a large harp, the nymph played a melody to soothe the pain. Since this was an awakened realm, such an approach was better than magic.

You must teach me how to do that, Viara said.

Healing music? You need magic for it to work out there.

If it makes people feel better, just music is enough. The girl remained still for several more seconds, then stood up. The euphoria from her victory had made her restless, even more since the nymphs music had started. Now that I won, do I get to know your name?

Which one? I have many names.

Your first name.

Maybe some other time. It had been centuries since the nymph used her name and not once had she regretted it. The question would come up each time shed acquire a new owner, but the answer was always the same.

Maybe I should just invent something, the nymph thought. If nothing else, it was going to reduce the conversations on the matter.

I have to call you something. Viara pouted. Harpsisword is too long and weird.

Im sure that someone with your mind trait will think of something, eventually. A trivial task for the future head of House Elazni.

Pfft! The girl snorted. Yeah, right. With your attitude, Im not sure. Everyone in the family is a lot weaker. Even grandad.

He was rather strong once, and a lot better at using music skills than you.

Ill be stronger, the girl said, brimming with determination. Ill become stronger than them all.

You might. The nymph stopped playing. And Ill be here to help you.

#### Chapter 885: Puppet of the Nymph Empress

The memory ended abruptly. It was longer than all the ones Dallion had experienced in the past and still felt too short. Near the end, he had seen glimpses of his grandmother. If only it had continued for a little bit longer, there was a chance hed learn more about her: what she was like, how she met his grandfather, possibly who had betrayed them both.

Im not going back! Harps terror quickly brought him back to reality.

For some reason, the deck seemed a lot smaller than it had moments ago. After witnessing the nymph fight in the open ocean, even a boat this large seemed constricting.

Grym remained there, a fair distance away. Further back, more Azures were gathering. All of them appeared human, but Dallion suspected that they had a nymph symbiote echo inside, controlling their every move.

Dont worry, Dallion told Harp. Youre not going back.

As determined as he was, there was no denying that he himself felt intimidated. Fighting a puppet couldnt compare to the real thing, but even so the entity standing before him was likely none other than the nymph empress herself.

Youre Tiallia, Dallion said.

The name made Grym pause. The nymph probably never expected to hear that from the mouth of a human.

Thats why you didnt put in so much effort fighting me, he continued, using as much of his music skills as he could muster. After all, the second Tamin empress had managed to defeat Harp with music alone. Maybe a similar attack would be successful here as well? Even after all this time, you were still keeping your promise. Thats why you can never

Trying to use music? Grym sounded amused. Even if I didnt know about your skills, Id have noticed. Just because you kept Gia safe, Ill let you live and have your little crumb on the shore. Keep your gorgon and whats left of the alliance, if you want. Just return her to me.

The man extended his hand.

So, this is your ultimatum, Dallion thought.

How about you make a Moon vow? he asked. Just in case.

A frown formed on Gryms face.

No?

If the nymph empress had any intention of sparing his life, it was gone now. On the positive side, at least he knew the stakesif he didnt give it his all, he wouldnt survive.

Youve seen theres no magic in this puppet, Grym continued. But you havent seen the other things hes capable of.

Wooden spikes emerged from the deck, thrusting upward. The action was fast, though not fast enough to affect Dallion.

I know hes a domain ruler, Dallion said. And I know hes excellent in actual combat. One might say almost as good as your sister.

There was no detectable change in Gryms emotions, but Dallion was certain the nymph empress was anything but calm. Being a mage and noble, there was one thing she had in abundance, one that she couldnt hide with skill or mannersego. Therefore, it was only proper that he pushed a little more.

I also know that you wont risk harming Harp. Not now, in any event. He held the harpsisword higher, displaying it prominently. Also Dallion performed a sudden point attack directly down. As he suspected, the mages protecting the ship had covered the outer hull with multiple spell layers, but no one had bothered to protect the deck itself.

Wood broke into fragments, as the force of the blow went on, then stopped by the outer magic shielding of the hull spread to the sides, destroying decks and people as it did.

This was the tipping point. The supreme arrogance of someone who had escaped banishment didnt let her put up with this. Seeing the symbol of her authority destroyed, Tiallia forced Grym forward. Dozens of other puppeted humans followed. Since no nymph lives were at risk, they had only one goal: kill Dallion, no matter the cost.

Swords clashed as the two exchanged blows. The puppets speed was greater than anything Dallion had seen so far. If the battle was back when he was at the Academy, he would have lost. Even now, it was a struggle to keep up.

Parrying with his harpsisword, Dallion struck at Grym with his aura sword, casting spells as he did. Magic circles appeared non-stop, showering all other enemies with aether shards. Most of them were able to fend them off easily, though there were a few that received serious wounds.

You cant win, Harp said, her voice still trembling. Youre not in a state that you could beat her.

But you are, Dallion replied.

The tip of Gryms blade pierced Dallions left shoulder. The pain was sharp, though bearable. Thanks to the firebird, Dallion didnt have to worry about consequences. No one could claim that it was honorable, but as he had seen, honor was judged by the survivors.

The puppets thrust was followed by a multi-attack, forcing Dallion to fly backwards in order to avoid it as much as possible. On multiple occasions, he attempted to break into instances, only to have them fade away due to a precise strike by Grym. Clearly, this wouldnt be the solution.

You wont risk harming her, Dallion said, using his music skills again. The way youre attacking, youll destroy the item.

There was no reason for such an idle threat to have an effect, and yet Grym paused. The few wounds he had closed with a distinctive magic glow, as he shifted his gaze from the harpsisword to Dallion.

Memory fragments, Grym said. Thats how you know.

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Does it matter? Dallion kept waving the aura sword about. Unlike his opponent, he couldn't afford to stop casting spells. Even if they were doing relatively little harm to the rest of the crew, they kept them pinned down and unable to attack.

Not particularly. You know what they say about a little bit of knowledge? A thin layer of water covered Grym's blade. It's always a dangerous thing. It's true, I won't let anyone harm my sister. But she's not that weapon just its guardian.

Faster than before, Grym flew forward, leaving a trail of instances behind. Left with no means of escape, Dallion remained where he was, just as the sword thrust into him.

## **MAJOR WOUND**

### **Health reduced by 50%**

A purple rectangle emerged in the air, quickly disappearing a moment later.

So overconfident, Grym said, a grin widening on his face. I've hated your entire branch since that witch used music on her. So many worthless Elaznis holding more than they deserved, more than they knew, and taking her for granted. Half of you would have lost their awakened powers if it wasn't for her. Grym twisted his weapon. Now she'll be where she belongs.

## **MAJOR WOUND**

### **Health reduced by 50%**

Another purple rectangle flashed above Dallion.

Just, he managed to say, gasping for breath. Just one last thing

Dying words? It's always amusing to hear those. They're overrated, but let's hear your take.

Why Dallion's words turned into a whisper.

Unable to help herself, the nymph made Grym move his head closer to Dallion's mouth.

Why did you assume I'd come alone? Dallion's voice quickly returned to normal.

Tendrils of blue flame shot out from Lux in an attempt to entangle Grym. Unfortunately, the puppet proved a fraction of a second too fast. Releasing his saber, the man pushed away, landing back on the remaining parts of the deck.

As he did, Lux tore off Dallion like a ball of flaming jelly. His shape stretched, then smoothened, extinguishing all flames, until a green glowing slime remained in the air, its entire surface covered with magic patterns.

A copyette?! Grym yelled in shock.

Not just any copyette, Dallion replied, using his aura sword to surround himself with several layers of aether armor. A friend.

Dont look down on the newbie, newbie, the copyette told Grym. Youre not the first to have tried this gig.

You?! The fear was palpable even through the human puppet. Its a trick. The Moons will never allow you to fight!

Just because I was banished? The copyette laughed. You were banished as well. Pulling the strings of a puppet doesnt make you immune. You started this.

An intricate spell pattern formed within the semi-transparent body, causing it to burst into thousands of droplets. Each drop was a copyette in its own right, all controlled by a single mind.

Get ready, kid, a chorus of copyettes said in unison. You wont get another chance at this.

Dozens of Azure ships launched spells and ballista bolts at what was left of the flagship. Unfortunately for them, the spells cast on the hull prevented any external damage from occurring. Walls of water shot up from the sea, surrounding it like a bubble.

## **REALM CREATION**

A green rectangle emerged.

**Pan has created the Land of SINKHOLE Level 1**

**Pan has granted you full control of the Land of SINKHOLE.**

**An equine has been designated as the lands guardian.**

**Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny.**

Dallion allowed himself a breath of relief. Never before had he felt so tense, yet somehow, they had pulled it through. The plan was as reckless as they came, but for once it had been Pan who had come out with it. He had no idea that Grym would turn out a puppet of the nymph empress, or that hed be on the flagship. After facing nymphs in the past, he knew that theyd be too arrogant to ignore the challenge of a lone awakened, especially a human.

There had been some risk. With the races magic traits, it was unlikely that the copyette would remain hidden, as he had during the Stars attack on Nerosal. For that reason, Dallion had decided to go with a different approachnot hide it at all. No mage would bat an eye at the sight of magic coming from a firebird. One would have to be incredibly skilled and cautious to check whether the magic threads were authentic or not. If any of them had bothered, they would have seen that the familiar awakening level exceeded a hundred.

And still, that was only half of the plan. Dallions entire fool-hearted attack was to hide something else: the small part of the copyette that made its way along the seabed, so it could create a realm in the center of the armada. After all, there was only one thing stronger than magicthe powers of a domain ruler on home turf. Now, thanks to a newly created village of one inhabitant, Dallion had gained control of the entire area.

Lets see you win this one, he said, flying back towards the coast as fast as a flight spell would let him.

Cones of water shot out from the ocean in an attempt to grab him, yet they were quickly sliced down with a pair of line attacks. That was just the start of it. Massive cones of rock rose up from the ocean floor, making their way to the surface. The sheer strength of the impact was enough to turn

over several vessels, despite all their magic protections. The flagship shook violently, disrupting the ongoing massacre between slimes and nymph-puppeted humans. Unable to breach its hull, the spikes continued rising, like a mountain beneath the sea. Within moments, a rocky island had formed, holding scores of enemy ships. Water poured down, as the entire section of the ocean parted, allowing land to fill the space between Dallions new domain and the coast. The sea invasion had just turned into a land fight, and unlike before, Dallions forces had the upper hand.

Go! Dallion shouted, using a magic symbol to amplify his voice.

You better survive this. Euryales voice was instantly recognized among all the other noises.

Thousands of gorgons leaped off the walls, charging forward at the attackers. Everyone knew that the casualties would be massive, but at the same time, theyd never get a better chance.

#### Chapter 886: The Harpsisword's Path

It was outright shocking how little the initial strike affected the rest of the battle. Dallion would have thought that the near devastation of the flagship along with an allied copyette emperor would have quickly caused the enemy forces to retreat. He couldnt have been further from the truth. By the time Euryales forces poured into the center of the battlefield, the enemys shock was largely over. All survivors who found themselves on the newly formed patch of land quickly charged in attack, while the surrounding ships provided support fire.

Dallions main focus quickly shifted from attacking to preventing ballista bolts from striking the armies. Mountain ranges rose and fell, shielding the gorgon soldiers when needed and opening up when it was their turn to fight. Doing it against a few opponents was easy, against so many not so much, especially since Dallion had to be careful not to harm any of his own troops by accident.

An intense ray of magic appeared. Originating from a ship, it easily blasted through the mountains that Dallion erected along its path, striking the city.

#### **INHABITANT DEAD**

**The city of ALLIANCE has lost 1 inhabitant!**

#### **INHABITANT DEAD**

**The city of ALLIANCE has lost 1 inhabitant!**

#### **INHABITANT DEAD**

**The city of ALLIANCE has lost 1 inhabitant!**

Thousands of rectangles appeared around Dallion, flashing in and out of existence. The domain was making him aware of the casualties. There was no indication who the people were or how they had died, just that they were no longer part of the city. That was the purpose of the rectangles, after all to allow Dallion to keep track of the settlements population at all times. If they would pass beneath a certain threshold, Alliance would be reduced to a city, and then to a mere town, if things continued.

If this were a game, Dallion would have outright ignored it. One of the common complaints he had back on Earth was that his notification log was cluttered with useless information. A few hundred or even thousands of people were hardly significant for a city of millions. It was only when casualties reached the six-figure range that hed start paying attention. Here, they were people. There was a

chance that he knew several of them. Yet, it wasn't only the people he'd have to think of, ten times more items guardians had likely perished as well.

Ignore them, Vihrogon said. There's nothing you could do. They're gone.

That was easier said than done. Dallion felt his heart tighten. Fighting had become normal for him, he knew that entities died every day. This was the first time he suffered losses as a domain ruler, though. The deaths felt a lot more personal.

Focus on what you can do, Vihrogon urged.

What I can do, Dallion whispered, attempting to use his music skills on himself.

In the past it had helped, making him faster, lighter, even stronger. He could well do that here, sing a song that would increase the morale of his troops. Maybe that would be worth it? No. The best solution was to take out the battlemage. Everything else was secondary.

Dallion focused on the ship. It was too far to be affected by his domain, but not for long. Venturing into the domain, Dallion quickly challenged the equine guardian in quick succession. His domain quickly reached the limit of a village, at which point Dallion decided to get creative.

At present, over ten thousand people had set foot on his new settlement. That meant that they were technically part of it. From there, it was only a matter of transferring them from one of his settlements to the other, to make it grow. It was a risky endeavor. Should too many of them get killed or flee, the domain would be forced to shrink again. However, that didn't matter so much; the benefits would be instant.

## **INHABITANTS LOST**

**10000 inhabitants removed from ALLIANCE.**

**10000 inhabitants have been added to SINKHOLE.**

So far, so good. Nox, let's continue, Dallion said.

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## **GUARDIAN CHALLENGE!**

**Nox has challenged the guardian of SINKHOLE on your behalf!**

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

The rectangle popped up as he was speaking. Defeating the guardian didn't take much longer. Surrender didn't seem like an option, so Dallion used a succession of three point attacks to deal with the matter.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

### **TERMINAL STRIKE**

**Damage dealt is increased by 1000%**



The obligatory red rectangles appeared. When it came to guardians, it was rare that someone other than Dallion would initiate the attack. Then again, that was single player. Against the opponents he had in mind, things remained different.

**SINKHOLE Level increased**

**The VILLAGE has been improved to a Level 5 TOWN.**

The area of the realm increased. Dallion could feel the new ships that had entered his territory or rather, the territory that had moved to include them. If he concentrated, he could feel every person and every guardian. The mage ship wasn't in, though already it was a lot closer than before. With a bit of effort, once in the real world, he could distract it for long enough to fly there and deal with the matter personally.

Dal, Harp said, a hundred feet away.

She was clad in highly elaborate nymph armor made entirely of water. There was something to be said about the advantages such armor brought. As long as one had adequate control, water could be as hard as solid metal but move as freely as fabric. Little wonder that the nymphs were a force to be reckoned with, especially at present.

Grains of fear still filled the harpsword guardians body, like seeds in a drink. They were completely overshadowed by the grapes of sadness that had spread throughout her like a vine.

It's alright, Harp. Dallion forced a smile. I won't force you to fight.

The nymphs expression didn't change.

It'll be fine, he continued. Trust me for once.

It's not about that, she said at last. I've not come to hide. I'm here to challenge you.

After everything Dallion had experienced in the last half hour, nothing came as a greater shock than this. Thinking back, he hadn't even heard of a guardian challenging its owner. They could rebel, they could hinder him in real life, but challenge never. He wasn't even sure it was possible.

The Moon's laws don't allow me to do it outright, so I'm asking you to challenge me.

Did someone set you up to this? Dallion asked. A spell I'm unfamiliar with?

You caught a glimpse of my past, she said. There was a time when I was very different from what I am now. I hated the world and everyone in it. I had so much hatred and resentment that the only way to keep a grain of sanity was to fight everything and everyone. I didn't care what my owners were, not what they did. The only thing that mattered was that they were willing to fight and kill.

Yes, I know.

No, she said firmly. You only experienced a glimpse. I wasn't blessed with the empathy trait, but I know that empathy insight only lets you see a few days. It probably seemed like centuries to you, or even millennia, but all you saw was a few days spread throughout that time. You couldn't feel emotions build but just their final state. And it's the buildup that breaks you.

Dallion remained silent.

The second empress changed that. She removed the pain with her music skills and earned my respect with her fighting abilities. In effect, she banished the person that I was, giving birth to what you've come to know as me. Now that my sister found a way to escape banishment, she also brought my past self with her.

So that's what you were afraid of, Dallion thought. It wasn't that she couldn't bear fighting her own; it was her fear that she would join them.

Few things were certain in this world, and for a while, banishment was considered one of them. There were rumors of entities who had managed to find a way out like Pan, for example, but they were keeping low, living in constant fear that any action might bring the Moons to react. That had changed when Dallion had learned of the Order's copyette network. Now, an entire race had been brought back into the world.

Even after everything she has done, Tiallia remains my sister, Harp said. I feel that I must be by her side. I can convince her to spare you and your domain as long as you join her. There will be no controlling echoes, no tributes, no punishment. You'll live in your part of the world like an archduke and do whatever you wish.

As long as it doesn't go against her, Dallion said. He could plainly see the conflict flickering within the nymph.

I also feel loyalty to you, she said. Not just because of the promise to your grandmother. You're doing things that shouldn't be done, more than any otherworlder I've seen except for my sister. If I'm to side with you, I have to know you have the strength to see it through.

Logically, Dallion agreed. In all honesty, he had plans to challenge her, just not this soon. The Order of the Twelve Suns had boosted him considerably, as had Euryales' decision to grant him her domain. Yet, when it came to combat, Harp was stronger. In her real body, she was powerful enough to be preferred for empress over her sister. The chains of guardianship limited her, no doubt, but was it enough?

What happens if I fail? he asked.

No matter what happens, I'll give you a chance, she said. If you win, I'll stay by you and give you a chance at becoming a Moon. If you lose, I'll have my sister pull back, giving you a chance to form an alliance with the emperor. Maybe you'll even be able to achieve your goal, only it would be without me.

And next time we meet, we'll meet as enemies, Dallion added.

If we meet, yes. The nymph nodded. There's no way around that.

As the two spoke, all inhabitants of Dallion's personal realm gathered around them. Echoes, familiars, and other guardians were there watching silently. All of them knew the significance of what would happen, just as that they would be of little help.

I'll fight you alone, Dallion said.

You can use familiars. They are part of your skills.

If I do, you'll never be certain whether it was them who defeated you or not. This way, there will be no doubt. He glanced at Adzorg and Vihrogon. Both of them nodded. I'll use magic, though, Dallion added. That is part of me now.

A faint smile appeared on Harp's face.

That's what my sister said a long time ago. Two rapiers of water formed on both sides of her body. Nothing held them to the nymphs' waists since she could control water, nothing had to. Will you let me choose the battlefield? she asked. You can use your powers to change it later.

You'd consider that fair?

Domain rulers fight with their domains. As long as we start on water, I'll be able to do so as well.

Domain ruler against domain rulers; an approximation, without a doubt, but still it balanced the scales somewhat. Harp's control over water versus Dallion's magic and domain ruler powers.

Where do you choose? Dallion asked. Your tower?

The open sea, she said. I'll give us both the freedom to change it as we choose.

The open sea Dallion repeated.

Don't worry, dear boy, Adzorg said in semi-whisper. I know a few spells that will help us follow the fight.

Thanks. The word dripped with sarcasm. So thoughtful of you. He looked back at the nymph. I challenge you, he said firmly.

**GIACCIA has accepted your challenge.**

Chapter 887: Warrior Nymph vs Domain Ruler

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

Both rushed into the sea at speeds that could be followed by none of the gathered observers. Adzorg's spell proved completely useless, for while it managed to see at vast distances, it was incapable of slowing down the blurs that were Dallion and Harp.

Is here good? Dallion asked, holding his aura sword in one hand and the thread cutter in the other.

It was a strange combination, but there was a reason for this other than his desire not to use guardian items. The thread cutter was the only weapon in his possession that was capable of slicing through cloud matter and air currents. As such, there was a very real chance that it could cut through water matter as well.

A bit further, the nymph replied, leaving a trail of ripples on the surface.

Dallion followed behind, having cast a flight and a dozen enhancement spells on himself and his weapons. He had also made sure to cover his skin with two layers of magic threads to shield him from any magic attacks, even if he doubted Harp would use such.

Here, Harp said a few seconds later.

Instantly, line attacks slammed together, causing the surrounding air to crackle.

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**Your attack has been sliced in two by GIACCIA.**

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**You have sliced GIACCIA's attack in two.**

**Attack has no effect.**

A double negation? Dallion thought. There would have been a time when he would have been impressed with himself. Now, he viewed things from an entirely different perspective: achieving a stalemate only meant that he wasn't winning.

Harp burst into three hundred instances, filling up a vast area of the sea.

Dallion followed suit, performing five line strikes with each. He knew that she was weak on receiving wounds, so kept up the pressure.

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**Your attack has been sliced in two by GIACCIA.**

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**You have sliced GIACCIA's attack in two.**

**Attack has no effect.**

Hundreds of rectangles popped up, reaffirming the stalemate. Dozens of spell circles formed with every strike, pouring aether shards in Harp's area. Waves shot up hundreds of feet high, blocking all the projectiles before slamming down again with a roar.

Maintaining his level of instances, Dallion sliced through them, pushing forward for a direct attack. It was said that mages and empaths weren't supposed to engage in one-to-one battles, especially against an enemy skilled in swordcraft. Dallion had seen the danger first hand, yet he found that preferable to losing sight of the nymph.

Rows of spears formed in the water, all flying straight at him in hundreds of instances.

Is this the feint? Dallion thought as he cast aether barriers in front and beneath him. Or is it the actual attack?

Using his guard skills, he made an attempt to complete a guard sequence, but couldn't manage to make the final step.

Time for the big guns. He did a series of three point attacks straight forward, while causing cliffs to shoot up from the sea floor. At their current speed, they'd hit the surface within seconds. Harp, however, had something planned for the meantime.

Without warning, everything around Dallion turned green.

An attack? He looked around with half his instances. It had been a while since he had seen this awakened marker manifest, but never before had it acted this way. He had witnessed large area effects. He had even seen the potential path of destruction of a mountain colossuss fist, yet even then there was an indication of where the attack originated. Here, it was coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Crap! Dallion managed to say at the very last moment. Thanks to his music skills, the sounds of that single word had created the smallest of shields, countering the music attack that followed.

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## **FATAL WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 75%**

The entire sea surface within half a mile vibrated, focusing hundreds of music attacks onto Dallion. Of all of his instances, barely a handful managed to survive, and even then at a significant cost. Jetting up into the air, Dallion tried to counter with line attacks from his thread cutter, but that did little good. Harps music was just too powerful. If Dallion were to survive, he had to resort to something he had only seen performed once. There was a lot of risk. If he messed it up, there was a chance hed kill himself before Harp had a chance to. Still, it was the only way.

Holding his breath, Dallion focused all his concentration on one single point. His right hand thrust the aura sword forward. As the force of the strike was about to be released, he moved his wrist.

Spiral, he thought.

The action was painful and difficult, as if he were trying to stop a rolling boulder with his fingers alone. Yet thanks to having a body trait of over a hundred, he pushed through the pain. The tip of his sword budged, making the slightest of circles. That proved to be enough. As the point of destruction moved down, a spiral thread had broken off from it. Both slammed into the water simultaneously, breaking it up into millions of droplets and scattering them away just as fast.

## **SPIRAL MASTER**

**(+2 Body)**

**An oldie, but goldie, even if you learned it through a cheat. Dont overdo it yet. Theres a lot more to come.**

A two point achievement? The trait increase was insignificant, but it still brought some joy to Dallions heart. Receiving an achievement meant that he had learned the skill. As for the warning he couldnt care less.

Using the magic threads of his body, Dallion cast half a dozen healing spells onto himself. Even at his current level, it would take a while for them to heal him fully, but even a percent a second was useful in his current condition.

Attack, magic, music! Dallion held his breath again.

The second spiral attack coincided with cliffs emerging from the sea. The timing couldnt have been better had Harp not moved from her current position.

Didnt think Id see anyone use that, she said, launching music attacks at Dallion as she spoke. You always were a quick study once your life was on the line.

I learned from the best, he replied, countering with a music attack of his own. You were a lot more vicious, though.

I was a nymph then. Without my guardian limitations, you wouldnt have gotten close.

Like the thunder fury?

### **MINOR HEAL**

**Your health has been increased by 5%**

You havent reached the power of a thunder fury. A massive wave emerged from the sea. One mile tall, and crashed upon Dallion.

Performing a standard point attack, Dallion immediately surrounded himself in an aether bubble. The mountain of water kept on crashing down. Its sheer volume was too large for an attack of that nature to stop it. Yet, it was more than enough to drill a hole through.

Reducing his instances to fifty, Dallion navigated the bubble through the tunnel hed formed. For any onlooker, it would start filling up within seconds, but at his speed it felt as if he were moving through a cave of glass.

As he was moving forward, Dallion noticed a minor peculiarity. Near the end of the tunnel, for a fraction of a second, he thought he saw the water flicker.

Damn! Dallion performed a line attack shattering his own aether bubble.

### **ATTACK NEGATED**

**Your attack has been sliced in two by GIACCIA.**

**Attack has no effect.**

### **ATTACK NEGATED**

**You have sliced GIACCIAs attack in two.**

**Attack has no effect.**

Just like in that awakening trial. Harp emerged, dashing forward through the tunnel. She was holding both rapiers tightly, cutting through the water as she ran.

Past Dallion wouldnt have thought nothing of it, but the present him could see the subtle attacks. The harpsisword guardian was using the water surrounding them to launch indirect music attacks. The threads were clearly noticeable thanks to his aura vision, even among all the other magic that filled the water.

Music attack! Dallion struck the walls of the tunnel as well, sending his own magic to counter.

Knowing it wouldn't be enough, he followed up with a double spiral attack.

## **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 5%**

## **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 5%**

A pair of red rectangles emerged. Dallion felt as if his hands were crushed. The pain quickly passed away, but the damage was significant, effectively reducing his health to a fifth. Still, unlike all the times before, a strange feeling of joy and accomplishment filled him the knowledge that he was facing a challenge worth overcoming. There was no point complaining, no point worrying. The only way was forward using every skill and ability at his disposal.

Acrobatics, Dallion thought as he cast a new spell on the soles of his shoes.

Both sides of the water tunnel exploded as the spiral attacks tore the mountain apart. Once again, they were in the open.

Keeping his guard up, Dallion leaped off fragments of water as if they were solid. The spell granted him that ability, even if temporarily.

The nymph was in the midst of a multi-attack of point strokes, when the rock cliff of Dallion's domain finally rose up between them. The ferocity of the attacks drilled it full of holes, but that cliff kept on rising.

Thanks, Felygn! Dallion said to himself. He knew that the mountain wasn't capable of shielding him from the guardians attacks, but it obscured her view to the point that he was finally able to complete a single guard sequence. Time slowed down just enough for him to evaluate his options.

Harp had already shown that her body, mind, and reaction traits were higher than she had let him believe. What about her perception, though? In hindsight, she wasn't able to fully take advantage of several opportunities so far. If Gleam were part of the battle, Dallion would easily be able to test out his hypothesis. As things stood, he'd have to try it out himself.

Releasing the thread splitter, Dallion drew a series of magic symbols onto himself. From what Adzorg had shown him, the best illusions were multi-layered. Only amateurs went directly for invisibility. The proper way to do it was to create an illusion of him being droplets of water, which he'd cover with three illusions of water spray, then finally start the invisibility symbols.

Chunks of rock flew in Dallion's direction, causing three of his instances to fade away. Harp clearly had no intention of letting him rest. It was also fairly clear that the ongoing attacks were a diversion for something else there was no way she'd allow for a sloppy attack such as this to last for so long.

Flying further down, Dallion doubled his efforts, completing a dozen illusion patterns in half a second. It was a good thing too, for barely had he done so then he spotted the markings of a new line attack from the side.

His immediate reaction was to negate it, as he had done many times in the past. Thanks to his force of will, he managed to stop himself from doing so. Already he could tell that the attack was going to

miss him. Countering it would only reveal his position and break the illusion he had painstakingly placed on himself.

The top of the cliff crumbled as the line attack sliced it clean in two. Looking closely, Dallion saw the thin layer of water that had accompanied the strike.

Why didnt you start with those? He wondered.

Even when it came to her future, Harp continued to treat him as a child. There was no guarantee that she would have won, but there was no doubt that Dallion would have been in a lot tougher position had she not gone easy on him until now. Maybe she was trying to gauge his strength, seeing just how much he had improved? If that were the case, it was time that Dallion found just where his present limits stood.

Chapter 888: Control of Reality

Music, magic, attack, art! Dallion flew through the air, constantly waving his aura sword as he did.

There were no additional instances of himhe was too afraid that any use of combat splitting would reveal his location. And since any direct attacks would also have easily given him away, he resorted to a combination he had rarely tried before.

Normally, music attacks combined with magic were his trump card when dealing with waves of enemies. This time, the method was completely reversed: the magic threads coming out of the sword were turning into sounds whose melody completed spells, only they did so a fair distance away. Harp could, of course, see the threads, but since Dallion was in constant motion, shed only see where he had been.

Perception is your weakness, he thought. Although calling it a weakness was very subjective. Most high-level nobles would have a tough time hiding from her. Even as a guardian, even archdukes would have an impossible time.

Turning yourself invisible, Giaccia said all of a sudden.

Dallion felt as if chunks of ice had formed in his stomach. It was too soon for her to have noticed. His instinct was to burst into instances to charge at her while he still had some sort of advantage. A moments hesitation made him delay just for long enough to see the nymph look away.

Itll be useless against my sister, she continued. Shell be able to see that while making you think she hasnt.

Threads of music went in all directions as she spoke, in an attempt to interact with Dallion. Countering them would serve no purpose, yet not doing so ran the risk of them having an effect. The illusion had provided him with a momentary tactical advantage, and now it was time to use it.

Using his domain powers, Dallion punctured holes in the nearby sea surface. Jets of water mixed with rocks flew in Harps direction. The nymph turned around, taking control of the incoming water. It was at that point that Dallion made his move.

Spark flowed through his aura sword, consuming all the illusion patterns hed drawn. A white glow appeared, culminating in a point attack set on Harps back.



## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 200%**

The amount of damage was less than Dallion would have liked. That didn't matter; it had proven that his attacks could land.

Dallion quickly followed up with a multi-point attack.

Although off-balance, Harp managed to evade most of the blows, though not all.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 200%**

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 200%**

Two more rectangles emerged, reducing her health by close to two-thirds. Thanks to the numerous healing spells, Dallion wasn't far off. They were at parity now, which gave him a slight advantage in the long term.

Darude! he shouted, summoning half a dozen clay cylinders.

Three were instantly shattered with a slice of his sword, causing three aether copies to emerge. The remaining three continued floating around him, waiting for the right moment to be activated.

In normal circumstances, the nymph would have no problem against his echoes. At the moment, every additional threat couldn't be taken lightly.

Threads of water shot up from the sea, reinforcing Harp's armor. Dallion's spark attacks had burned through the magic threads, creating holes in the defense. In less than a second, there was no longer any trace; a sphere of water ten feet wide surrounded the guardian, providing a vastly superior protection than before.

That's cheating, Dallion thought while his echoes concentrated their attacks on one spot.

Using spark attacks had proven capable of piercing through, though with so much, all they could manage was to break off chunks only to have them instantly filled up.

A new cliff peak emerged, striking the sphere dead center. That much force would have been enough to destroy a colossus, yet it only thrust the nymph upwards without a single red rectangle.

To a degree, this could be considered a win. Dallion had managed to force an all-out attacker to assume a defense position. Sadly, that wouldn't win him the fight, nor would be a solution in a real-world situation. A complete defense didn't prevent a person from casting spells, especially if they were considered a magic prodigy.

Gripping the aura sword tightly, Dallion flew after Harp. Point and line attacks continued to pour onto the water sphere, occasionally accompanied by a spell or two. The nymph didn't seem in the least concerned, responding with attacks of her own. Bolts of hardened water would launch from the water's surface, fading away echoes by the dozen.

You'll never win like this. The surface of the sphere vibrated in Harp's former voice. You need to be able to withstand lethal attacks and pierce through unbreakable defenses.

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Dallion was already aware of that. He knew that the ray of destruction would be of no use; he had seen it deflected while fighting the nymph invasion not too long ago. As Adzorg would say, it was time to identify the question so he could come up with an answer. It was claimed that only awakening trials had answers, but that wasn't strictly true anymore. Being a domain ruler, it was up to Dallion to find the answers in real life. Alternatively, it would be better for him to surrender and become a vassal of Emperor Tamin or the nymph empress.

Time seemed to freeze again, as he concentrated on making full use of his mind trait. An image of a sphere emerged in his mind. The ball had millions of magic threads creating a thick mesh that isolated the nymph from any outside force.

Using spark was an option, but only if it were strong enough to cut through the sphere in its entirety.

In Dallion's image, a beam of white energy hit the sphere, barely causing a dent. Slowly, it grew to the point that it was as wide as the ball's diameter. That would definitely be a solution, but could he even create a spark attack as powerful? His three echoes had attempted and failed. His own contribution would hardly add anything more.

Magic was another option. There was a vast assortment of spells that could poison the water, or heat it to the point that Harp would have to disperse it. It would be tricky to get close enough to apply the spells in question, though not impossible. No doubt, an immediate counterattack would follow, and that was if she didn't use the new substance against him. Being scorched by boiling water was definitely going to inflict more than a bit of damage, likely enough to reduce his health to zero. Then again, Harp wasn't the only one capable of creating defensive meshes of magic threads.

Focusing back on his surroundings, Dallion cast a dozen spells covering his body with additional layers of protection. Unlike the aether barriers and armor he usually used, these were a lot finer, covering him like a fine mesh. Special care was made to have them negate the effects of heat and poison. Once done, Dallion proceeded with the main plan.

All four Dallions darted at Harp's sphere. Cutting through tendrils and avoiding water projectiles, enough instances of them reached the surface of the sphere. That was rather good. Dallion had expected at least one of his echoes to die in the attempt.

In pairs of two, they started drawing poison and heat symbols on the water's surface. The attempt proved to be too rash. Without mercy, Harp thrust in the direction of an echo with her rapier. The sharp form pushed the water in front of it until an exact replica of the blade emerged from the surface, piercing an echo through the shoulder. Hardly a lethal attack, it proved enough to reduce the entity to a cloud of fading dust.

## **MINOR HEAL**

**Your health has been increased by 5%**

Another rectangle emerged in front of Dallion. Taking that as his cue, he quickly pulled away and not a moment too soon. Multiple water rapiers emerged from the surface, missing him by a hair. The remaining instances weren't as lucky. In their attempt to add one final symbol they were each pierced by a rapier attack and reduced to nothing.

Too late, Dallion thought. He could already see the symbols taking hold. Harp was trying to eject them from the water sphere, but they were entwined with the magic mesh itself, making that impossible. It would take a mage to diligently untangle them one by one, and from the memory fragment, it was clear that Harp wasn't capable.

The whole sphere contracted, shooting out thousands of shards of hardened water. Dallion expected as much, slashing them with his aura sword. The few that hit dissolved a few layers of protection, though didn't deal any additional damage.

Time for stage two, Dallion thought. As a massive chunk of rock shot up from below. This time, instead of slamming into the sphere outright, it changed form surrounding it like a prison.

**POISONED**

**GIACCIA's health has been reduced by 1%**

**POISONED**

**GIACCIA's health has been reduced by 1%**

**POISONED**

**GIACCIA's health has been reduced by 1%**

Red rectangles stacked. By every account, Dallion's plan had succeeded. Part of him was ready to rejoice, but another, the more cautious one, kept its guard up. There were countless times in which Dallion had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. There was no reason to think that Harp was any less capable.

To be on the safe side, Dallion grabbed one of the remaining floating clay cylinders and waited.

Several more red rectangles popped up, after which the entire rock prison cracked, sliced in two. Immediately, Dallion broke the cylinder, sailing forward.

The spell capable of destroying mountains struck the side of the rock, burning through as if it were paper. As the remains shattered, the ray continued towards the horizon, yet no new rectangles emerged.

Damn it! Dallion burst into instances.

Somehow, Harp had escaped. Even after Dallion's meticulous planning, and a lot of luck, he had still failed to win outright. His pulse tripled in anticipation. The guardian had one course of action: attack.

A green cone flashed on Dallions chest. Taking no chances, he performed a spiral slash. The cone vanished, as Harp darted to the side just in time to avoid the lethal attack sent her way. She was still surrounded by water, though far less than before.

I thought I poisoned you, Dallion said, following up with two more line attacks.

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**Your attack has been sliced in two by GIACCIA.**

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**You have sliced GIACCIA's attack in two.**

**Attack has no effect.**

A pair of red rectangles emerged.

You tried, the nymph replied. But I control water.

That was true. Despite everything, she remained a nymph. Even when the water was poisoned, she could still move it away from her with the same ease a cat wagged its tail. Imprisoning her in rock had managed to earn Dallion a few points, but nowhere enough. He'd have to do a lot better. No doubt that was Harp's way of giving him a taste of the battles to come. If he was expected to win against the nymph empress, he'd have to fight in her own territory. That meant fighting in the open ocean, where Tiallia was in full control.

That's the question, isn't it? He told himself.

Everything he used so far amounted to interestingly possibly ingenious tricks, but they weren't the answer.

What could one do when facing a nymph in its element? A split second later, a smile formed on Dallion's face. It seemed so simple now, and something he could certainly pull off. It would be the same in the real world, but on a whole different scale.

Yes, you do, he said, flying right at the harp's sword guardian. And here, so do I.

Chapter 889: Platinum Achievement

Chunks of water flew in all directions, twisting, tearing, then merging again without reason. None of them could hold any form for long, controlled by two forces stronger than gravity. Harp's natural ability allowed her full control of the magic threads that composed the liquid, while Dallion's awakening powers granted him control of everything within his domain.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd make use of his surroundings, raising mountains or hurling chunks of rock about. Only now he realized how deep his control went. Within his domain, he could be treated as a nymph, as a dwarf, as a fury, and a lot more. Every part of the environment could bend to his will. In the past, he had only focused on the obvious, as had many of the domain rulers he'd seen.

The sea beneath Harp and Dallion thrust up, giving birth to waves the size of mountains. Each would slam into the other, attempting to envelop it and steal away as much of its substance as possible.

Just like a tug of war, Dallion thought. Just like combat splitting.

The tip of a rapier thrust towards his chest. Before it could reach it, though, the water it was composed of lost its hardness, dripping away as the nymphs hand stopped ten inches away, holding an empty hilt.

Dallion could see the relief and pride within her blossoming like sunflowers. She was pleased that hed reached his current level, though that didnt mean she was simply going to give up.

Your grandmother would have defeated me by now, she said, tearing a chunk of the sea, which she transformed into a giant harp.

Before Dallion could react, the harp played a few chords, filling the air with sounds of destruction.

### **AVERAGE WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 10%**

### **AVERAGE STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 50%**

A pair of red rectangles emerged simultaneously. Harp was definitely putting him through the ringer, not sparing her own health just to deal damage.

Going through options in his mind, Dallion focused on the air around them in an attempt to create air currents powerful enough to negate the sounds. His execution was completely wrong, causing two more rectangles to appear in the air.

At this rate, two more seconds and hed be done for. Harp wasnt particularly better, but the point of the challenge was for him to defeat her, not have them both lose their health as a result of the nymphs actions.

You could be quite extreme, he thought. Never giving an inch, even when defeat is likely.

Her latest action had put him in a rather difficult spot. He could probably take control of the water harpthe control over his domain was stronger than her control of waterbut that was a temporary measure. All she had to do was form another harp of water and repeat the attack.

Sorry, Harp. Dallion infused his sword with spark to the point of shining, then threw it straight at the nymph.

Evading it would be elementary, but that was never the point. The bright glow, while incapable of blinding her completely, obscured just enough for him to use his final two clay cylinders. Within each was a ray of destruction spell that shot at her.

The surroundings turned purple. The rays crashed into the sea, burning through until they reached the bottom and continued a bit further.

### **REALM DAMAGED**

**Overall stability 95%**

## **REALM DAMAGED**

### **Overall stability 90%**

Red rectangles emerged a result of self-damaging actions. Dallion split into instances, searching for the red rectangle that mattered. After several fractions of a second, he finally found it.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

## **ARM SEVERED**

### **GIACCIA will no longer be able to make use of her RIGHT ARM**

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The brief moment of joy was quickly replaced by caution. He was certain that such an amount of damage would be enough to defeat her. Apparently not. By his estimates, she couldn't have over five percent remaining. That and a missing arm would have been enough to ensure victory against most entities. However, nymphs didn't need magic to control water.

The fingers of both of Dallion's hands moved wildly about as he set on casting as many seven-circle spells as possible. Three aether bubbles emerged around him, each reinforced with silence symbols. They were fragile enough to shatter at the first major strike, but Dallion was banking that his makeshift soundproofing would be enough to save him from what could be the final music attack. It was a gamble, but one he didn't regret taking. Based on Harp's following attack, she'd either join him against the nymph empire or he'd have to face it on his own.

## **AVERAGE STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 50%**

The outer bubbles shattered in an instant, their aether spreading about like fading dust. The inner one vibrated violently but managed to withstand the force of the attack.

## **HARPSISWORD Level increased**

Dallion caught a glimpse of the coveted blue rectangle. Even in such a situation, his crafting instincts kicked in, making him examine all available improvement materials. The huge majority were no different from the weapons' current material, but among the hundreds, there was one that caused his heart to skip a beat.

### **The HARPSISWORD has been improved to MOON PLATINUM**

Nothing less than you deserve, Dallion thought.

It could be said that this was the first major fight he'd won on his own. In the past he's always had assistance, and often faced enemies who were considerably weakened at the start of the battle. While it could be argued that Harp had the constraints of being a guardian, she was among the strongest opponents he'd ever had.

## **PLATINUM ACHIEVEMENT**

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

**You managed to improve an item to Moon Platinum. You know you want it, so here it is.**

A second rectangle emerged.

Cute, Dallion said, undoing his aether bubble.

Waves slammed down below as the sea began the long process of settling down. After everything his realm had been put through in this fight, it was going to be a while before things were back to normal. Gen was going to have a fun time repairing everything, but given the victory, he'd approve of his actions.

No need for you anymore. Dallion glanced at the tattered cliffs sticking out of the water like rusty nails. One thought and they quickly submerged, out of sight.

You're the third person to level me up. Harp appeared a dozen feet away.

Looking at her, Dallion could see no difference, but he knew she had changed. If nothing else, he could tell that she was on his side now, ready to put the past behind her and join the fight against her own sister. In that, he didn't envy her one bit.

You said my grandmother was faster, Dallion replied with a smile.

The nymph waved her hand. As she did, the sea beneath them instantly calmed down to its usual stillness.

She could never have achieved this. In the previous two times, I fought as a guardian. Against you, I fought as a domain ruler.

Dallion nodded. This was the final lesson the nymph had taught him the correct way to fight domain rulers. Coincidentally, Dallion had caught a glimpse of it in his grandfather's memory fragment, only from the opposite direction.

I must say, I'm slightly disappointed, dear boy, Adzorg said. Thirty-seven seconds of blurriness and splashes. We'd have appreciated something a bit more opera-like. Although, well done. You've achieved a rather impressive victory.

One that you'll keep from the emperor, I hope, Dallion thought.

Let's join the others, Giaccia said. Everyone deserves a bit of celebration.

In the middle of a war? If I don't stop the nymphs, there's nothing from

The fight has already made you out of sync with the real world. You'll gain nothing going out there in your current state. Relax a bit, heal, get some rest. There are many things you need to consider before you return to the real world.

That sounded just like the good old Harp. With the shadow of her former self put to rest, she was back to being the motherly figure that had guided him since his first steps into the world of awakening. She was right, of course; Dallion did need a moment of rest to reboot before plunging into the fight outside. That was one of the good things about awakening one could take a pause to let

go of it all. It wasn't a foolproof method. As Dallion had seen, there were cases in which entities could interfere with the time to pause, though now that the void had been dispersed, there was no fear of that.

For the first time in a very long time, Dallion allowed himself to spend some time with the inhabitants of his realm. Looking at them, it was remarkable how many of them there were and how much they had grown. Ages ago, only a small crackling cub had been here, later accompanied by Nilor what Dallion believed to be Niland the strange firebird chick that had become Lux. Gia had later made her way into Dallion's lifethrough a series of machinations by the Order and House Elaznithen the armadil shield.

There was also the case of Dallion's echoes. Reluctant to create any on his own, he converted them from his awakening trials, making them join his realm one by one. Gen, the current caretaker of Dallion's personal realm, was the first. Then Julythe one to tend after the familiar companions of the realm. That one had joined the realm with Gleam, who had been freed from a Mirror Pools hand mirror. And finally, there was Arielthe cold, seemingly distant one, who took on the role of protector against any realm invasion.

Other guardians had also joined in: the shy bowl dryad, Ondathe moody teenage forger, the twin dagger guardians as well once they had been purged of the void that controlled them.

And, of course, there was Gem. The aetherfish remained confused about the entire situation, though not one to say no to celebrating. He floated about, moving from conversation to conversation, always listening in, yet rarely saying a word.

Finally, there was the latest additionthe childhood bully turned friend.

I have to give it to you, Veil approached, holding a glass of dark indigo liquid. You actually managed to improve. He shoved Dallion's shoulder. Remember what a wimp you were back in the village?

I doubt you'll ever let me forget, Dallion said beneath his breath.

Full of awakening ego, yet frustrated that you couldn't get to level four. Veil took a sip of his drink. Back then, one level seemed like the entire world. Before the envoy came to Dherma, I didn't think that double digits existed!

You have your grandfather to thank for that, Dallion thought. And mine.

Remember the crazy plan for taking down the chainling? the blonde laughed.

Don't remind me

You were an idiot to think it would work. I was a bigger idiot for following you.

We still made it, though.

I guess that makes us three lucky idiots.

There was a pause. Thinking about the first hunt made Dallion think about Gloria, which in turn made him think of Eury. Looking back, both of them had missed a lot of opportunities together, always focusing on other things while time passed by. One of the fallacies about being awakened was that they had all the time in the world. In truth, all the time meant nothing if it wasn't used



adequately. Awakened remained people like everyone else. There was a constant danger of them being killed, sealed, or corrupted by an embodiment of the void.

I should have given it, Dallion whispered.

Huh? Veil looked at him.

Nothing. I was just thinking about the battle were in. Theres more than one nymph out there.

I have faith in you. Veil gave Dallion a slap on the back. Because if not, were utterly screwed.

Famous words of motivation. Dallion shook his head with a laugh. Still, he planned on winning this. There were too many things he had to do for him to fail here.

Chapter 890: The Last Battlemage

Reality hit Dallion like a ton of bricks. It didnt matter how much he thought hed prepared; the change ripped away everything he knew, replacing the worst parts of his memory and then some.

## **INHABITANT DEAD**

**The city of ALLIANCE has lost 1 inhabitant!**

Death rectangles kept on flowing around him, faster than he would have liked, though not as bad as it could have been.

The mage, he told himself. For there not to be a repeat of the previous attack, he had to find the ship and deal with the mage.

Time crawled slowly as Dallions mind trait kicked in. The latest temporary settlement had grown enough for him to be able to control the area. Before his fight against Giaccia, he had meant to transform it into an island with which to attack. Now, he knew he didnt have to. The greatest issue the only real issue when it came to domain ruler combat was the living resource. The nymphs had ships, but didnt own anything beyond them. For Dallion to counter their water abilities, he had to spread out into the sea, for which he needed large contingents of troops at least five thousand each.

You can change the size of your domains, Giaccia reminded him from his personal realm. Theres no reason to keep them round.

*Just like at the vortex fields.*

Yes, just like there. Dallion could hear her smile. A domain is no different from an item, just on a larger scale. You control everything that it part of it, including its boundaries.

This was the first he heard of that. Then again, the nymphs had discovered a lot more that people gave them credit for. Their patron wasnt the Moon of the mind, but that didnt make them any less creative, especially since they were led by an otherworder.

Concentrating on the area bubble of Sinkhole, Dallion squeezed.

## **DOMAIN CHANGE**

**The domain of SINKHOLE has become irregular.**

**You might not be able to use its full capabilities in that state.**

Interesting warning, Dallion said, looking at the red rectangle.

It doesnt mean much, Giaccia explained. I never even discovered what the full capabilities of a domain were. If Tia knew, she didnt share.

No doubt the empress wouldnt. On the other hand, it wasnt like Dallion planned to use this domain other than a temporary asset. The only thing hed take from it was the guardian.

The more he squeezed the domain bubble, the faster it moved. Careful not to affect the troops already there, Dallion focused on the far end, transforming the shape into a cone with a very long tip.

A ship shattered, sliced in three, the lines of destruction continuing further into the sea. Euryale had joined the fray with a bang. Three times the level of the average soldier, she made her presence known throughout the battlefield. Moments later, a second ship followed, destroyed in a similar fashion.

Hundreds of puppeted humans jumped off other vessels stuck on the new shore. Unfortunately for most of them, they were quickly transformed into statues by the approaching gorgons. More line attacks followed with dozens following Euryales example, focusing on one particular target. Several ships flew off, like a campaign cork, scattering crew members in the sea. The inertia slammed them into a few more vessels on their way, creating ripples of chaos on the battlefield.

It was tempting to say that Dallions efforts had paid off, but even these latest victories were far from turning the battle in his favor. Everything so far had been a battle for survival. The enemies remained more numerous and on the attack.

Another ray of destruction flashed, this time focusing on Dallions new island. Aware that neither water nor rock would be able to withstand a hit, Dallion quickly sunk the landmass beneath the ocean while keeping the water from flooding in.

It was a chaotic action, causing a lot of disruptions and not a number of casualties, but the majority were saved. More importantly, Euryale was fine as well. The ray flew above the island, continuing onward towards an uninhabited part of the coast.

## **INHABITANT DEAD**

**The city of SINKHOLE has lost 1 inhabitant!**

A new wave of rectangles stacked up. That was the last straw. Focusing his efforts, Dallion extended the domain to the mages ship. Water grabbed the hull, like a giant tendril pulling it in.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

The action was sudden, causing the majority of the crew to lose balance. Simultaneously, Dallion flew forward to meet it.

What are you doing? the harpsisword asked. You dont have to engage him directly.

Dallion didnt reply. While his actions could be viewed as reckless, it saved time; and as he knew perfectly well, time was the last thing a powerful mage should be given.

Reaching out, he summoned the harpsisword. The new material made it shine as if it were made of light.

Are you with me on this, Harp? he asked.

The chords of the harpsisword vibrated in the form of an answer.

Spark! Dallion slashed the air in front of him, releasing a line attack.

The attack chopped off the masts of the ship in one go, causing the air currents to pull them off. A better view was revealed, allowing Dallion to spot the mage in question. He was the only one among the entire crew who was left standing. Short and skinny, the man was someone to whom no one would pay any attention. Graying hair covered his head, making him seem more like a clerk or accountant than anything else. The magic threads within him were impressive, though.

Dallion attempted to check out his level only to see a blank rectangle.

*Know him, Adzorg*

? Dallion asked.

Possibly, the former archmage hesitated. There are some similarities, but its difficult to tell.

*Who do you think it is?*

*The last real battlemage joined when he was fifteen. I only saw him a few times, but theres a chance that might be him. If he is, theres nothing for you to worry about. True, hes a former prodigy, but hes no match for Argus.*

That wasnt as much a relief as the old man thought it would be. While Dallion had defeated the Azure mage, there had been a massive number of casualties. By Dallions estimates, tens of thousands had perished before the emperor had launched his rockets. Here, he couldnt afford a fraction of the losses.

Striking again with his harpsisword, Dallion sent a point attack towards the enemy mage. The Azure must have expected such a reaction, for he responded with a distortion spell, causing the attack to bend around him. A massive hole emerged on the deck, but the mage himself was safe.

Almost in perfect sync, he and Dallion went on to cast a series of spells, covering themselves with protection. Dallion was at a slight advantage, using his aura sword to also attack while casting. The distortion spell was rather potent, for while Dallions attacks wrecked what was left of the deck, not one of them managed to hit the mage.

Adzorg, whats that spell? Aether layers surrounded Dallion.

His opponent had cast a few defense spells, but there was something abnormal about his magic threads. As much as one looked at them, there were no instructions, as if they werent real.

*All battle mages have a unique ability they keep hidden from everyone else. Thats what makes them so good at what they do. Katka could manipulate her threads better than anyone else, though she didnt make the cut.*

Gleam, is it an illusion? Dallion asked as he cast an aether sphere around the battle mage. The spell worked as expected. Apparently, it was only when targeting him specifically when things went off.

Want me to go out and check? The shardfly asked with scary enthusiasm.

*No! Remain with Di. I dont want her doing anything stupid.*

Always the babysitter, the familiar said in disappointment. Hes hiding something, but it might be just to protect his magic.

The aether sphere Dallion had created shattered.

Even as the cracks formed, Dallion continued with a barrage of line attacks using combat splitting to follow the direction of each one. The battle mage, on the other hand, had summoned what looked like a handful of marbles, one of which he threw forward.

*Careful!*

The harpissword moved on its own, slicing through the piece of glass. A purple explosion followed as the magic released within the item was released in the air.

So thats how you want to play, Dallion frowned. The moment of the explosion, he had glimpsed the true nature of the item. It wasnt a magic grenade, or anything as crude. Rather, it was nothing less than a sphere prison. One touch and Dallion would spend months, maybe years, trying to figure out a way to escape, by which time he would have been killed in the real world and the battlevery well lost. Well, two could play at that game.

Harp, can you take him? He flew back, seemingly on the defensive.

*Someone with his skills? Easily.*

*Have fun.*

The battle mage darted forward, believing to have gained the momentum. That proved to be a costly mistake. While he remained careful not to be in contact with the remains of the deck or any water, the ship had been partially pulled into Dallions domain, giving him control of the air itself.

Welcome to my realm, Dallion snatched the man out of reality.

Time split in two. In the real world, the mage kept on flying forward, ready to throw the rest of the sphere prisons at Dallion. In-between the two fractions of time, a battle had taken place. Dallion had witnessed Giaccia descend upon the unfortunate man in her full wrath. The battle wasnt particularly long; it wasnt even challenging. Gaining control of the waters in Dallions realm, she had quickly slammed a dozen waves onto her target. His protective spell had attempted to distort the force, but doing so was like stopping a tiger with a fly swatter.

With nothing to limit the waves, they broke down the mages defenses, tearing the magic patterns one by one. Realizing what was going on, the so-called former prodigy tried to counter with a ray of destruction spell, but that was easily deflected just before Giaccia thrust her rapier through his chest.

## **TERMINAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 1000%**

## **PERMANENT EFFECT - SEALED**

**WAZY REKEEs awakening powers have been sealed.**

Two red rectangles were all it took to show the fate that expected the former battle mage. The awakened realms had no room for him anymore. The devastation of the loss, combined with the even greater shock of not being able to use magic, would transform him, possibly crippling him for what was left of his life. Dallion couldnt help but feel some pity, although after the devastation the ray spell had caused in the city, he wouldnt lose much sleep over it. War came with a lot of death and casualties, even for empaths.

Losing control of the spell, gravity took hold of the mage, pulling him quickly down.

Instinctively, Dallion cast a spell to keep him in the air.

Theres no point, Adzorg said. The boy is gone. Without magic, death would be a mercy.

No, Dallion said.

It was tempting to agree and put an end to his life. There wouldnt be any point, though. The threat had been eliminatedthe mage wouldnt be able to cast spells again, so there was no point in killing him. Yet, would he be able to keep him alive? Adzorg hadnt been wrong. To a mage, losing magic was the same as losing the will to live.

Casting a calm spell, Dallion surrounded the mage in an aether sphere and lifted it high in the air. Once the battle was over, he could retrieve him for questioning. Until then, a lot more needed doing.

Its a mistake, Adzorg insisted. Its doubtful he knows much.

Battle mages arent puppeted, Dallion said.

*Dear boy, if there was any danger he could reveal anything, the nymph empress would have made his head collapse in on itself.*