

The Fall 965

Chapter 965: Walk out of the Dream

"How is it?" Um'ha smiled. "You have been frowning at that ball the whole day. For weeks, really."

The intricate machine of interlocking parts sat in the cavity on the worktable, both table and contraption created with such detail that the mechanical orb could freely be rolled in place without the slightest resistance. Thousands of parts and years of work to create something never-before-seen in this world. Yet Anson wasn't happy.

"Taking a walk helps clear the head; come keep me company."

Anson didn't move for a few seconds, but he eventually roused himself and looked up at his partner with a smile. "A walk sounds lovely."

"Good," Um'ha said. "You know, sometimes it feels like you are cheating on me with this thing, spending your days locked away in here. I've even considered smashing it to have you all for myself."

"But you didn't," Anson smiled as the two left the small workshop, arm in arm.

"I wouldn't destroy something you worked so hard on," Um'ha said. "Besides, it's quite beautiful in all its intricacy. Even if it doesn't work in the end, we can always put it in the front yard as a centerpiece."

"Perhaps," Anson nodded.

They exited their manor at the edge of the town, walking with no particular direction or purpose in mind.

"You know, I still don't understand what it's supposed to do," Um'ha said as she waved at a neighbor hanging her laundry. "Qi'schzto is getting along. The child should come within a month."

"I hear Haldo has his hands full feeding all seven," Anson said as he nodded at the highly pregnant demoness.

"The water array you installed on the community field has lessened the pressure on him. On all of us," Um'Ha said before poking Anson with her elbow. "The ball?"

Anson looked up at the beautiful red sky stretching across the horizon, the puffs of clouds that couldn't have been painted better by a master artist. Perfection under the Heavens.

"It will change the world."

"Change the world?" Um'Ha muttered. "I think it's pretty good, though?"

"That it is," Anson sighed.

"There is no need to put this kind of pressure on yourself," Um'Ha said, patting Anson's hand. "Just trust in yourself and walk forward."

"Thank you," Anson nodded as the two continued the walk.

They passed the smithy where Un'do was hard at work repairing the metallic sheets that would be put up before squall season, to protect the harvest from the overpowering rain coming down from the mountains. They saw the Mayor, trying to once more wrangle the twins into gainful employment, when all they wanted was to randomly swing their ironwood swords and talk of adventure.

They passed through the town gate and the communal fields, where the Lonton stalks were already reaching Anson's chest, and the bushels of Prokko seemed to be ready for harvest within days. Um'Ha exchanged a few friendly words with most of the townspeople who passed them by, while they treated Anson with a respectful distance.

After all, Thaumaturges were rare in the countryside, even this close to the capital.

Their life was different from how they'd lived when under the court's employ as a botanist and Grand Scholar. Simpler, closer to nature, to the point Anson could feel the breath of the world. At least he thought so, though it should be impossible.

Only three hours later did they return to their home. Where it waited. Anson felt queasy as they passed the picket fence to their garden, but he couldn't delay any longer. Time was running out.

"The Realmkeeper Orb is complete. It has been for some time now," Anson said as he grasped Um'Ha's hand.

It was slightly calloused after years of fieldwork. There were also the small scars and burns she'd gained after various experiments meant to improve the yearly harvest. More than anything, it was warm, and Anson could feel her pulse that slowly beat with the frequency of the Heavens.

"Does that mean you've made your decision?" Um'ha said as she grasped his hand tighter.

"You knew?" Anson said with shock.

"Not all of it. But you have been... bleeding... into the surroundings the past month," Um'ha said as she led him into the workshop. "I've come to understand some things. We're dying, aren't we?"

"I'm sorry," Anson said, his vision blurring as he looked at his wife of fifteen years. "I can't hold on any longer."

"Will I see you again?" Um'ha asked as she touched his cheek.

"One day, I'll be powerful enough to let you walk out of the dream," Anson said, tears flowing down his eyes as he placed his hand on the Realmkeeper Orb. "Until then, you will live on in my memory."

Janos opened his eyes, a sense of profound loss filling his heart as he looked at the foreign sky above him. The world was so bleak, a shadow of the imaginary realm he'd lived inside for the past years. No, it wasn't illusory. It was a mirage created through unfathomable means. He could have lived his whole life there if not for the fact that the world was decaying.

But it could be made anew.

Janos' eyes turned to the shimmering globe in his hand. The Realmkeeper Orb was now no larger than a fist, flickering in and out of reality. It held the key, the key to get her back. He slowly pushed it against

his navel, toward where his core would be in the future—an illusory core leading to a mirage world. And one day, a false heaven would be made real.

The orb settled and a screen appeared, confirming what Janos already knew.

[Seal of the Mercurial Court (Unique, Inheritance): Form a seal of the Mercurial Court. Reward: Become a Realmsinger of Ultom. (1/3)]

“Work, you bastard,” Emily growled as she kicked the panel, but she immediately regretted it. “Sorry, darling. I was just too eager.”

The only response was a groaning hum as the lamp flickered.

“Why? Why won’t you do me this one solid?” Emily swore as she threw the chisel at the ground. “I’ve treated you like a tender lover for over a year. I’ve repaired you, sourced materials from my own stuff, mind you. I had to melt down a tank in outer space just to make you the antenna. Do you know how much it hurts to spacewalk without a proper suit? Of course you don’t; you’re a broken beacon.”

“What? I just did it for the shiny new wings? I did it for all of us. So we can go home. And you can’t even send out one little signal to do your part?”

Chris didn’t answer, as he was wont to do, and the hum died down a moment later. The silence only lasted a few seconds before Harry started singing.

“Well, shit,” Emily swore as she started to furiously crank the winch that realigned the propulsion array on the outside of the SS Trashheap, and it sputtered to life a moment later. Soon, the directional scanning array pointed to the source of the ominous song.

She took out her tablet, and a series of calculations allowed her to breathe out in relief. The storm didn’t move in her direction. She would be fine if it didn’t change trajectory over the next hour. Emily looked at the housing holding the scanning array and caressed it lovingly. “You’re the good one in the family, Harry.”

The signs were good, but that was no guarantee in this place. If anything, it was a miracle she was still alive after being stuck so long in the broken-down hub. Thank god for Spatial Rings, and thank god for a paranoid teacher who had drilled in the necessity of bringing years’ worth of provisions everywhere.

Emily looked out through the screen at the spatial storm in the distance. What was he doing right now? He should be back on Earth by now, right? Or was he perhaps here, looking for her? The thought was comforting, like he could appear at moment’s notice on the horizon.

Then again, she wasn’t sure he even knew about her situation. The advance army was slated to head deep into the Million Gates Territory to rack up enough Contribution Points to get a headstart in the upcoming war. They weren’t supposed to return for another year at the earliest, and the home base knew it was impossible to send messages back.

Would Warsong and the others even say anything if they managed to return? It would be a huge hit to morale if people found out they’d lost everyone so soon after arriving. And it would be a hit to the prestige of the leaders if they returned alone, having failed to save anyone of their subordinates.

Something like that would make it impossible to participate in the upcoming war in any organized fashion.

Her scattered thoughts put aside, Emily instead focused on what was important; to take from the storm as it had taken from her. It was time to practice. She crawled out from the pod and into the living room, where the larger screen was already running. Emily looked at the phenomenon far in the distance where a region as large as dozens of planets strung together was being twisted on its head.

Reality was forced into an unpredictable dance where distance and proportions were in constant flux. Spatial tears thousands of kilometers long, lashing out with wild abandon. And as the universe danced, so did the axes that had appeared in her hands.

By the time Emily had healed up, or more like when the pod's anesthesia ran out, seventy days had already passed. The nasty wounds from the spatial flux had been mostly healed by that point, and she had already expelled the wild Dao of Space in her body. Seventy days was more than enough to confirm no one was coming for her, but she wasn't willing to just wait for death.

So she had hatched a plan. If no one would come save her, she would simply have to save herself. Her main project was Chris, the rescue beacon that sent a deep pulse into space that would reach incredibly far. But she had also improved the pod in general, and the main cockpit was now a separate compartment built and soldered onto the pod by herself.

It was lucky she had a Fire-based Dao, which allowed her to repurpose the various items in her Spatial Ring. Today, her cramped little pod held oceans of space; a cube over three meters across. The original pod, with its wiring and other systems, had been placed beneath the living quarters like an engine.

Wings had been soldered onto the sides, and she had even managed to repurpose a few weapons she'd gotten from the crazy Ishiate into rudimentary propulsion engines. They couldn't do much, but they could at least change the direction she was floating in, which had saved her from flying straight into a sun months ago.

With space being in such flux, the ship could be standing still at one moment, only to be hurtling through space with such speed the surroundings were a blur the next. Honestly, it was a miracle the ship remained intact after all this time. It was the benefit of having been deposited in an extraordinarily empty stretch of space.

A humming song accompanied Emily's dance as a dozen flying axes started dancing in the small compartment around her, flashing back and forth seemingly erratically and at random. The same was true for herself as she swung her two tomahawks like a conductor of chaos. But within the chaos was order.

There wasn't much else to do on the SS Trashheap except work on the broken arrays and cultivate. Since there was only so much she could glean by angrily glaring at inscrutable arrays, she had spent most of her time on the latter. And while it was a wretched existence, the constant threat of death had kept her motivated enough to make a lot of progress, allowing her to digest most of Warsong's lessons in record speed.

Her axe array [Dance of the Five Seasons] was essentially mastered by this point, thanks to strengthening her soul with the method she got from the Big Axe Commander. But she was still trying to

incorporate it into a holistic and dynamic approach. That was where the Spatial Storms came in. They could appear like a summer's squall out of nowhere, and their twisting arcs of destruction contained endless mysteries.

She wanted to take the mysteries of the storms and become the tempest herself. She'd become the heart in the dance of axes, striking when her array had paved the way. She didn't cultivate the Dao of Space, but it was all related. The cycles of Nature were not made up of arbitrary rules. They were the result of the stars, of gravity, of the kind of rotational force she saw all around her.

Seeing another Spatial Storm up close was a rare opportunity to refine her idea, but her session was abruptly cut short by a new appearance on the screen.

A ship.

It had been spit out from the storm just like she once was. They did seem better off from the experience than her, even if the large Cosmic Vessel was missing some sections. A steady pulse of energy was still being released from the engines at the back, and it was flying away from the storm. This was her only chance.

She'd survived seventeen nearby storms, but Emily knew her luck would eventually run out. Just being swept up in the edge of a storm would disintegrate the SS Trashheap and her with it.

"I'm sorry, darling," Emily sighed as she opened the panel and inserted an inscribed Nexus Crystal. "I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this."

Two wires of E-grade Starsilver were added next, forming a crude route bypassing most of the array. It was time to go all out.

The array hummed to life, and Emily screamed with excitement as a deep pulse passed out from the makeshift antenna on the top of her vessel. A snap quickly brought her back to reality. The array disk had snapped from being overloaded with energy, a reminder this was a last-ditch measure. If these people didn't come for her, she would be in an even worse spot than before.

Emily became a flurry of activity, activating all her prepared measures. A series of incredibly bright lights, both technological and magical, lit up on the hull, turning the SS Trashheap into a blinding beacon that should be impossible to miss in this desolate corner of space. The minutes passed, and nothing changed. The ship was getting further and further away.

"Please, please," Emily whispered as she looked at the Cosmic Vessel far in the distance.

Then, it turned.

A wave of relief so powerful it almost made Emily delirious swept through her, but she pushed it down as she readied herself. This wasn't the old Earth, where a castaway being rescued by a ship would turn into a global feelgood story. This was the Million Gates Territory, where the darkness of man was on full display. Few good ones were traveling these waters, and those who did were unlikely to operate such run-down vessels like the one that was inching toward her.

Still, being captured by pirates beat slowly dying in the emptiness of space. She'd heard that was how a lot of groups expanded their crews. They captured smaller crews and press ganged those who weren't too stubborn. Some would become meat shields, while others could slowly integrate into true members.

Her features shifted thanks to [Million Faces], turning her into a young man half a head taller than herself. She slung a mage's staff across her back, while the tomahawks returned to sheathes hidden within the sleeves of her arms. The minutes passed, yet they felt too short as Emily tried to prepare for any eventuality of what awaited her on the ship.

The SS Trashheap shuddered as a gravitational array pulled it in, and the ship thumped down on metal inside the hangar a minute later. A group of ten soldiers was already waiting outside, but she was relieved upon seeing not one of them was a Hegemon. If she were lucky, they'd all been killed when the ship lost its tower and a wing.

"Thank you, thank you," Emily said with a bow as she stepped out of her vessel. "Thought I'd end up as stardust."

"Lad, how did you end up in that thing?" the man asked as he looked at the odd-looking escape pod with a frown. "Where are you from? What quadrant is this?"

So that's how it was. They were lost after the storm, possibly with navigational arrays damaged. They only picked her up to get their bearings.

"My ship was blown up in a Spatial Storm not long ago," Emily said as she warily looked around. "I don't know which quadrant this is, but I am willing to work for passage."

"That's a shame, but we could always use some helping hands," the leader slowly said.

They didn't seem like pirates, but Emily couldn't be sure. These people seemed too organized, but some of the most dangerous pirate crews were as organized as any militia. She surreptitiously activated [Daybreak Revolutions], giving her eyes a second sight that showcased energy flows. Only a glance was needed to shock her to the point the skill collapsed.

These people had monsters hiding in their bodies.

Emily's reaction was instantaneous, and a blazing arc of flame punched a hole through the leading man's chest, even if he'd had his guard up. It instantly killed him and the parasitic creature that had made his chest its home.

"Attack!" another man screamed, but he didn't have a chance to launch a single strike before a five-meter salamander wrought from flames swallowed him in one bite.

Emily was right on the heels of her familiar, a storm of axes already raging around her. It looked like she had finally encountered the infiltrators, which meant she'd either have to commandeer the vessel or be infested with those cursed things.

It was time to put her newly devised [Tempest Bop] to the test.