

Positive

Orchid spots a particularly unusual area of time distortion and you and Thalassa wander over to investigate. It appears to be a wall of moving air, but whether or not it's the spell or just a temporally displaced area of wind you aren't sure. Before you can ask Thalassa she sticks her face in and declares it to smell of strawberries. Not to be outdone you stick your nose in as well - but what greets you isn't sweet, it's the sharp tang of ozone and it makes your eyes water.

Blinking your eyes clear you stare out at the amassed forces arrayed before you. Division after division of Defenders, friends and colleagues from the Circles and Towers, representatives of each Temple and every one of the Guilds. Possibly the largest army this Barony has ever put into action - in truth, just about everyone capable of combat of one form or another within the Barony. Each and every one trained, prepared and ready to go do battle with the Gamesmaster and his forces.

It had taken some trickery, but a specially-briefed patrol had persuaded him to wager the strength of his forces against the Baron's for the future safety of the Kingdom. He'd accepted readily, clearly believing he had the upper hand; when Pathfinder reports had come back about the massed undead, demons, barbarian clans, Hassani tribes and other assorted creatures, his readiness to accept was easily understood. Of course, what the Gamemaster hadn't accounted for - and the only thing that had made the Baron agree to offer the deal - was you. Faliece - the Barony's secret weapon.

When this is done you know at the very least a promotion to the Head of the Circle is coming. If the victory is decisive enough there are rumours the Prince might take you on as one of his personal advisers. You look out at the assembled forces, see the nervous tense energy of some, the regimented trained calm of others, and throughout the growing sense of anticipation. And every one of them has their eyes on you.

The commanders are waiting for you at the battle map, one set of figures representing each part of the Gamesmaster's forces; his warcamp, his fortifications. The scouts reports were thorough, the Gamesmaster seemingly happy to let the weight of his army be assessed presumably assuming its sheer size is sure to intimidate any foe. Or so he believes... Scattered among the figures representing the Gamemaster's army are a much more diverse set representing the divisions and units of the Barony's army, with a few key individuals even represented by lifelike figures of their own.

"You clear on where every soldier needs to end up?" checks Warden Commander Alvrice. You grin, and reassure him that every single member of his troops will be placed exactly where they are required.

Taking one final look at the map to fix it your mind, you walk over to the ritual circle. You check everything is exactly as it should be, and then prime a Shocking Grasp ready for when you arrive at your personal target location. While around you the commanders prepare the army for imminent combat you begin casting your personal masterpiece, the spell that has made you so valuable to the Kingdom. By cleverly combining Air and Earth in ways no one had even considered before you've created a way to much more accurately teleport large numbers of people at once, without needing the preprepared points of the FRAN network and over a much wider area. It's easy, exhilarating work to summon forth the combined powers after so much covert practice; you take the time to make a show of it, making the ritual seem both more magnificent and complicated than it perhaps needs to be. The minutes pass quickly, the assembled commanders watching with awe and tense readiness. Nearing its end you give the predefined signal to the commanders to give their final orders then utter the final few words.

The world shifts and warps and in a moment you're there - exactly where you wanted to be, right behind the target deemed worthy of your personal attentions. You give him just long enough to exclaim in surprise at the sudden arrival of the Barony forces throughout the war camp before you make your lunge; as your fingers

brush his the metal of his helmet, you wink and feel the lighting pour forth from your fingers eagerly as if even the elements wants you to succeed. In a flash the head of the Gamemaster's avatar turns to smoke accompanied by shouts of horror from his assembled generals. The unleashed lightning reacts with the air and the smell of ozone fills your nostrils; your eyes water again, making it hard to see any potential enemies coming your way. Blinking them furiously to clear them you find yourself back among the patrol, your hands still spread out in front of you in readiness.

Neutral

The way that the landscape keeps changing subtly around you - especially in response to the weather in other possible times - is really quite distracting. Every so often the changes are distinctly less subtle; a tree changes as you draw level with it into a freshly lightning-blasted stump, the leaves on the path suddenly slick with rain and the air redolent with the sharp tang of ozone. You turn to point it out to Thalassa curious to see if you can both see it. The circle behind you continues to arc and crackle from the lightning already stored within it - it's not strictly necessary, but it's generally considered polite not to call up manifestations of the elements without something to stop them wandering off. The Wardens in particular get quite tetchy about it. Tinker lounges in the doorway, distinctly unimpressed with the proceedings, but the unofficial 'rules' also state that a second mage for emergencies is required on first contact with any elemental creature.

You can't remember who it was that first unlocked the secret to summoning - not elementals as such, nor demons with elemental affinities, but the other creatures that exist in the elemental planes. The salamanders, the undines, the gnomes and - as you are currently trying to contact - the sylphs. Some have postulated the existence of entire alternative ecosystems on the elemental planes, whole worlds the mirror of this one where humans and elves would cause as much excitement as sprites and elementals do here, but right now you're only interested in seeing if you can get a sylph to appear and talk to you.

It's the first step in a process that many of your fellow mages have already worked through, the benefits far outweighing the possible problems. Unlike the huge, unwieldy and often angry creatures traditionally referred to as elementals, the smaller ones are generally much friendlier and more curious about this world - a lot like the air elementals that were stuck in the FRAN all those years ago. They're also a lot smarter, perhaps to make up for their size difference, or at least have an intelligence that's easier to understand. And, most importantly, they can move in and out of the planes of their own volition as long as there is something of their element they can move into on this plane - and there are very few places without air.

The spell itself is somewhere between a ritual and a plea; it mostly consists of making an area that is 'friendly' to a sylph then extending an invite into the Plane of Air and hoping someone friendly is interested enough to come and investigate. That's the main reason Tinker is here, in case whatever you manage to attract is something less than friendly...it's also why you've practiced getting out of the door in as short a time as physically possible without magic, because the last thing you want to do is invoke Air spells while a magical creature of Air is trying to kill you.

The hardest part isn't the spell, it's the long wait once the initial 'invite' is made. You can feel power slowly dribbling out of you into the ether, the 'bait' on the end of your metaphysical 'line'. The first clue that it's working is the playful breeze that suddenly springs up in the confines of the circle, mussing your hair and tickling your nose. It soon tightens into a person-size whirlwind, picking up dust, then from that emerges a roughly humanoid form made of highlights and dust motes. It looks at you quizzically, a smile playing over non-existent lips - then it appears to spot Tinker.

The form 'explodes' and reforms - and now there are two Tinkers, one of whom is see-through with exaggerated features. You clearly managed to attract a sylph with a cheeky sense of humour... Looking at Tinker, now glowering at the sylph's impression, was clearly a mistake; you double up in laughter, straying closer to the circle. The sylph leans forward and manages to beep your nose as you lean slightly too close; a tiny spark, no worse than you'd expect off a doorknob on a dry winter's day, zaps your nose, startling you and causing you to breathe in a mix of ozone and dust. With a sneeze you jerk upright - the room, the sylph and Tinker are gone, but the patrol are waiting patiently.

Traumatic

As the party progresses you come across a odd, perfectly circular patch of heavy rain maybe six feet across. You circumnavigate it, watching it intrigued, when a sudden bolt of lightning flashes down in its center. It temporarily blinds you, forcing you to shut your eyes in reflex as your nose floods with the scent of ozone.

You open your eyes, trying to blink out the afterglow of the torches as you stare down into the darkness of the ruins. The Shadow has already downed two of your party, their strength stolen entirely from them, and you're determined not to let it get away again. The rest are holding the line against a pair of death knights.

You spot movement further in and blink after it. If you can just catch it with a Shocking Grasp you'll kill it like you killed the last two. This one seems more cunning but it's no match for your awesome skills if you can just get close enough... You lose it briefly, but no mind; you take a moment to ignite a torch on a wall nearby, hoping to trap it with the light. The light reveals the stonework here is in a much better condition than that nearer the entrance; from the dust on the floor it doesn't look anything with feet has been here for a very long while.

Movement out of the corner of your eye alerts you to the Shadow lurking on the edge of the torch's flickering light. Carefully, calmly, and quietly you cast up your spell, then in a sudden movement lunge at it. You feel the electricity discharge letting you know you've caught it, but you're weren't fast enough - it lunged back at you as you leapt in, and too weak to support yourself you collapse to the ground, your chest burning where it's landed its unholy touch..

As you hit the floor you feel a stone shift beneath your weight, sinking down beneath you, followed by a series of ominous thumping sounds somewhere out of sight. Then the grinding starts, quietly at first but slowly growing louder. It seems to be coming from right above you. You can't see what's happening, can't draw enough breath to call for help, and although you can just make out the sound of the party fighting in the distance they're too far to hear the sound that is now filling your ears.

You can do nothing but stare upwards as the ceiling slowly emerges into the light, can't even turn your head away as it slowly, inexorably sinks downwards, forced to watch as it lowers inch by inch it towards you. Soon the ceiling reaches the torch and breaks it; the burning end falls out of sight and then goes out. Stuck in darkness with the grinding sound of the descending ceiling as your only company, there's absolutely nothing you can do but wait and pray to anyone that might be listening for rescue.

It's only minutes but it feels like hours, the grinding of stone on stone driving you mad, before you feel the rough weight of it beginning to press against your nose. You close your eyes, the pain growing, suddenly able to smell nothing but stone and pain and blood that somehow translates in your despair to ozone. Just as you think your nose will break the pressure suddenly vanishes, light surrounds and you open your eyes to find yourself lying among the patrol.

Ridiculous

The wind blows strong and sudden, pushing you to your knees; it carries with it the raw scent of ozone and a cloud of dust which forces you to shut your eyes. You make yourself open them - it's too dangerous to be blind for long - and crawl coughing and choking further down into your fox hole until the dust clouds roll by. The sounds of explosions grow ever louder in the distance.

The spluttering of a fellow sufferer brings to mind that you are at least not alone; you're on medevac duty, using your magic to bring injured Defenders and others back here for treatment - or to take the Marshal sharing your foxhole out to the injured if it looks particularly serious and time is of the essence. With the dust clearing you get back to the job at hand; carefully you crawl up towards the lip of the hole and peer out at the forces arranged around you. A network of trenches and dugouts scars what used to be farmland, battalions of Defenders staged throughout. The final line of defence between the invaders and Heusenbergl.

Some of the more research-minded of your colleagues at the Circle are frantically working to find a weakness of the enemy to exploit, or at least to try and understand where the invaders have come from; everyone else who can wield any useful magic, see lightning and hear thunder has been drafted into the front lines. The current best guess is that a band of druids down in Arboria have gone rogue and broken the treaties with the Kingdom. Waygate fell a week ago, and Heusenbergl is their next major target, although they've taken out every town or village they've come across en route. An explosion rocks the trees nearby and you cover your head, wishing you were more research minded yourself.

The explosions stop; in the sudden calm you hear the crackle and hum of lightning restrained and fight the urge to drop back into cover. The first terrible shapes emerge from the treeline, in twos and threes until the horizon is black with them, shapes seemingly pulled from your deepest nightmares.

The clams are huge, a good ten feet across, floating gently over the tops of the trees and across the landscape. Lightning flickers over the underside of their shells, the occasional bolt discharging into the ground below them - or anything else unfortunate enough to be underneath. On each clam stands three or four man-sized squirrels clad in wooden armour, between them a pile of melon-sized acorns.

One of the clams drifts close enough to the ground to trigger a charge; as a line of Guards erupt from a trench and run at it, the nearest squirrel grabs an acorn from the pile, twists the cap and throws it at them. It explodes as it hits the ground sending the Guards flying, their bodies twisted and burnt. The archers start unleashing arrows from their trenches in the hope of deterring the squirrels while the mages focus on taking down the lead clams.

You start to scramble out of the fox hole, intending to grab the nearest Guards and drag them to safety, but something makes you hesitate; an eldritch blue glow builds on the front row of clams, the accompanying hum filling your ears and briefly drowning out the noise of battle. You realise what's about to happen too late to shout a warning; the accumulated lightning discharges into the lead clam, momentarily making it glow like a small blue sun, then a sheet of raw crackling energy sweeps across the first line of trenches. You dive to the floor as a rolling blast wave passes over you, carrying with it the screams of the dying, the stench of burnt flesh and the tang of ozone.

The silence is sudden and unexpected; you lift your hands off your head and look up at the rest of the Mad Ox patrol, a look of concern or bemusement on each of their faces.