

## Leveling up 941

### Chapter 941: Mistress of Puppets

The ground kept disintegrating in a five-mile radius. The number of point and line attacks targeting Dallion was so great that even the domain itself had trouble keeping up to protect him. Spikes would injure dozens, occasionally killing one or two in the process, but that would do little to hinder the mass of steel.

The noble with the steel tendrils slashed through the air, sending hundreds of line attacks in one blow. While each was individually weaker than those of a normal person, together they were a serious threat. It didn't help that they indiscriminately sliced through soldiers on their way. The countess had no value of human life, least of those belonging to her.

Splitting into instances, Dallion combined a vertical line strike with a multi attack.

### **ATTACK NEGATED**

**VALORR's attack has been sliced in two.**

**Attack has no effect.**

Dozens of red rectangles blinked in and out of existence, though even they proved unable to stop everything. The solution was for Dallion to fly higher into the sky, even though that would make him a prime target. At the same time, it also gave him the possibility to perform an area attack of his own.

Taking a deep breath, he did a spiral attack aimed at the archduchess, followed immediately by a magic music attack. It would have been better if he still had rays of destruction remaining, but most of the clay cylinders had already been used up, and Dallion didn't want to risk venturing into his realm to make more.

As expected, hundreds of soldiers leapt in front of their nobles, performing an array of defensive line attacks. None proved strong enough to stop the spiral attack, but managed to slow it down so that the only thing that reached Priscord were drops of blood.

"I've over ten thousand, in case you're counting," she said in an amused voice. "And that's without counting the reserves. But should you somehow manage to deal with them, the emperor has entrusted me with several legions as well."

The boast made Dallion think. There seemed to be more beneath the spite. While ten thousand awakened was a massive army, it wasn't the largest, and it definitely wasn't worth bragging about. With the exception of the archbishop, all conquerors had armies in the millions. Not only that, but while she claimed that the emperor had entrusted her with his legions, there didn't seem to be any cloud forts in the air.

"Then how about I take them at once?" Dallion whispered.

A wide patch of ground beneath the archduchess and her armies suddenly fell through, creating a deep pit. The armies in full plated armor scattered, in an attempt to escape, yet less than a thousand seemed to do so. The empress, in contrast, didn't budge. The horse she had mounted remained floating in the air, as if nothing had changed. Not only that, but magic threads had also extended, keeping the two harpissword nobles in the air as well.

Harp, what's that? Dallion asked.

It's not a creature I've seen, the nymph replied.

Having Vihrogon here would have been better, although Dallion strongly suspected that the creature had been created, or rather modified, like the crimson furies.

Taking no chances, Dallion quickly closed up the enormous pit. Before he could manage, however, thousands of soldiers flew up, filling the air. A few hundred were squished by the earth, slamming together, though not nearly as many as Dallion had hoped.

"Living armor," he said. How come he hadn't noticed that before? Whatever magic there was in the armors, it had to be hidden deep inside. "They're a bit smaller than I remember them."

"The original creators had a lot to compensate for," Priscord replied. "I don't."

A new series of attacks filled the air.

In the blink of the eye, the entire space was filled with instances. Even if the common soldiers weren't able to split into more than twenty, that made close to a quarter million facing three hundred.

A moment of shock went through Dallion, quickly replaced by a new sensation—the thrill of battle and the desire to defeat everything thrown at him.

The archduchess had covered all the angles: echoes to grant her minions strategy, artifacts to give them flight. It was also noticeable that despite their low levels, their speed was quite close to a hundred—another magic artifact or spell that had been cast. Even so, there was one thing that the woman had forgotten: a thousand people with a thousand separate skills couldn't compare to one who could manage a combination of all, especially within his domain.

"Countess," Dallion shouted, deliberately aiming to irk her. Red rectangles flashed non-stop as line attacks canceled each other constantly. "You've never been to the Academy, have you?"

"No." The archduchess retained her cool. "I never considered it worth anything much, even when I gained my current title."

"Let me tell you one thing..."

Of all the remaining buildings, books and scrolls flew out of the shelves. Like swarms of insects, they amassed, flying from all directions straight towards Dallion. It would be several minutes until all of them arrived on the scene, but that wasn't of consequence, especially for what Dallion had in mind.

## **DOMAIN AWAKENING**

Reality shifted. It didn't shift just for Dallion. In less than a second, everyone in the real world was transported into the realm of his new domain. In many regards, things were no different than they had been before. Here, just as in the real world, Dallion maintained control over the realm. There

were also a number of differences as well. For starters, Dallion's feet existed here, as did a host of area guardians.

"Goldy, get her," Dallion ordered.

The golden colossus emerged from the ground, dashing straight for the countess. In contrast to everyone else, its strength and speed were considerably faster, not to mention it was immune to spells.

Not in the least taken aback, Priscord snapped her fingers. All the armors of her soldiers—nobles included—burst, increasing tenfold. Apparently, the living armors were also blooming items as well. Being taken into the awakened realms had boosted their size and abilities to a considerable degree. How considerable, would soon be seen.

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"You disappoint me." Archduchess Priscord yawned. "Did you think that I wouldn't have a counter for this? You think you'll impress me by being a domain ruler? I've fought in such battles decades before you showed up."

"That's not the reason I brought you here." Dallion attempted to complete a guard sequence, but the attackers didn't let him, always disrupting it halfway through. "As I was saying, the Academy is probably the one place in the world that has the largest number of physical books."

At that single moment, a spark of concern emanated from Priscord. She had grasped what Dallion was going for, and by all accounts it was too late to do anything about it.

Scholar skills combined with music, spell craft, and attack, releasing thousands of aether quills from the hundreds of thousands books and scrolls that existed in the realm. Like deadly hail they ascended on Priscord's army on all sides. The outermost layers of the army tried to block the quills' advance only to be drilled full of holes, like bullets drilling through a rotten scarecrow. And best of all, Dallion didn't have to worry about the colossus guardian, since they didn't affect him in the least.

**TERMINAL HIT**

**Dealt damage is increased by 1000%**

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Red rectangles filled the air like a sea of red. There were so many of them that they covered the entire sky, making it seem like a crimson sunset.

The sudden change in circumstances had forced a large part of the army to shift. Even with their boost, they still had to deal with the colossus, while also protecting Priscord from the aether quills. The momentary chaos created a single opening.

The harpsisword seemed to move on its own, slicing through two soldiers that blocked his way. The spark covered edge went through the massive armor as if it were butter, causing it to blast from the inside.

**TERMINAL HIT**

**Dealt damage is increased by 1000%**

**TERMINAL HIT**

**Dealt damage is increased by 1000%**

Two red rectangles emerged, after which the soldiers vanished as they were thrust back into the real world, their awakening powers sealed. That wouldn't get rid of the echoes inside then, but at least made Priscord vulnerable here.

Thrusting his aura sword forward, Dallion cast a series of magic circles. Aether shards began shooting out, while chains targeted the nobles protecting the archduchess. To further cut off her support, Dallion pulled up the ground surrounding her, creating high cliffs. Unlike the other terrain changes in the realm, no one would dare attack these with line attacks out of fear of harming her. At this point, only one unknown remained—the horse.

Three of the nobles flew at Dallion, attacking him with their special weapons. Their armors, too, had blossomed into more elegant versions of living armor.

Bursting into instances, Dallion evaded the tendril sword's attacks. At the same time, Gem flew in to meet the ax of another attacker head on. A loud cling resonated, pushing the aetherfish back, though by no means diminishing its determination. Meanwhile, Lux transformed the weapon he was inhabiting from a pair of bows to a crossbow, firing bolts of light at the third noble like a machine gun.

"Good work, guys," Dallion whispered as he flew past, continuing towards his target.

I could take care of them easily, Gleam said, itching for blood.

I need you to keep an eye on Aqui, Dallion insisted.

*She's a great dragon! Even if she's a cow, killing her won't be easy.*

Keep an eye on Aqui, Dallion said in a firm tone that quickly ended all protests.

A short distance away, the two nobles had combined their music skills, creating a shield around Priscord. Their skills were impressive, though nowhere near anything he'd seen in the former House Elazni. It was a novel use of their powers, though. Dallion made a note to experiment using in the future.

“Move away!” He shouted, using his own music skills, combining it with magic. His own music strands tore through the defensive mesh, striking both of the nobles.

**PERMANENT EFFECT - PARALYSIS**

**IHIJON has been rendered incapable of movement for 20 minutes.**

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

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That’s two down, Dallion thought, tightening his grip round the hilt of the harpsisword. Only one left.

Splitting into fifty instances, he unleashed a spiral attack right at the archduchess. His expectation was that the horse would transform into something and block the attack. No such thing happened.

Priscord herself leaped off the creature’s back. A one foot dagger appeared in her hand with which she slashed the air, performing a line attack.

**ATTACK NEGATED**

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

**Attack has no effect.**

Huh? Dallion instantly performed a series of line attacks.

This was the first time he’d seen a spiral attack be stopped and in such an effortless way. There was no way this could be due to Priscord’s strength. Even if he wasn’t able to see her white rectangle, the woman’s traits were well beneath the hundred. If nothing else, she wasn’t an otherworlder and thus subject to limitations. It had to be some artifact she was wearing.

“Admiring my weapon?” the woman asked, as she kept on negating Dallion’s attacks. “It’s a nice trinket given to me by the emperor. One of several.”

“So, it’s your trinkets versus my trinkets?” Dallion asked, taking the opportunity for a music attack. To his surprise, the harpsiswords held by the paralyzed nobles played on their own, negating it as well.

“Yes.” The dagger glowed purple. “That’s precisely it.”

**Chapter 942: Mass Ejection**

A battle on two fronts continued in the Academy realm. On the periphery, the gold colossus along with thousands of books kept on unleashing attacks on the archduchess’ army. In the center—separated from them by a circle of constantly renewing mountains, Dallion and Priscord were engaged in a fierce fight, while his companions were holding the perimeter, keeping the remaining nobles, and the occasional soldier, from coming to her aid.

Dallion remained convinced that in a one-on-one he'd easily win, but the woman wasn't making it easy for him, relying on more than the average number of tricks. The harpsiswords and other weapons belonging to her nobles turned out to be just as efficient on their own. If anything, the people were only there to carry the items in the real world. The rules of the awakening realms allowed the guardians within to do so on their own. It didn't matter that Dallion had rendered the people effectively unconscious. Even if he sealed their powers and ejected them out of the realm, the weapons would remain unaffected.

The glowing dagger was also a matter of concern. Glowing in magical light, it seemed to have the ability to negate any attack. For the moment it didn't seem like the weapon was good for offense, but it was always possible that Priscord was keeping that as her trump card.

For the moment, what he was most fearful of remained the horse. Far too big to be normal, far too full of magic to be natural, it remained floating in place, ignoring everything around it. On two occasions Dallion had sent a few point attacks its way, trying to get it to do something—anything. And yet, the creature hadn't, stoically taking on the damage, then immediately healing the afflicted wounds.

"I heard you got married," Priscord said as she performed a multi kick. The heels of her shoes had transformed into stilettos that came with effects of their own.

#### **MINOR WOUND**

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

#### **PERMANENT EFFECT - BLEEDING**

**You have been scarred by the attack. The scar will continue bleeding in the real world until the status is removed.**

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

Another pair of red rectangles emerged. This was the seventh wound Dallion received. Health wasn't an issue. Even without Lux's help, he knew enough healing spells to deal with the issue. The annoyance was the bleeding. It was going to cause problems in the real world at a time that Dallion could do without distractions.

"You're very talkative for someone who doesn't use music," Dallion replied, as he pulled back and counterattacked with a series of point attacks. A large part missed their target. Those that hit didn't cause any damage whatsoever. That was rather interesting.

Harp, is that normal? Dallion asked.

No, but I don't know how she's doing it, the nymph guardian replied.

Veil, get Pan! Dallion ordered within his personal realm. Get him to figure out what's going on.

There was no time to get a response, for the countess reacted, twisting her body in a series of spin kicks. Catching the pattern, Dallion attempted to complete a guard skill series. Once more before he could, one of the enemy harpsiswords darted right at him, ruining the sequence.

“Close,” Priscord said with a smug expression.

The weapon’s action, however, had created an invisible opening in the mesh of sound shields protecting the archduchess. Instantly, Dallion took advantage, slashing through the air with his own harpsisword.

The attack was blocked by the weapon, but enough sound threads managed to pass through. Uncertain what exactly to target, Dallion went straight for Priscord’s left ear.

#### **PERMANENT EFFECT – PARTIAL DEAFNESS**

**The LEFT EAR of ARCHDUCHESS PRISCORD has permanently gone deaf. She will not be able to make use of that ear until the status is removed.**

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

There was a barely audible snap, followed by a scream, as the woman grabbed hold of her bleeding ear. With a body trait such as hers, the pain was hardly significant; more specifically, it wouldn’t be considered significant if the countess had ever experienced pain in her life. Despite the many battles she had gone through, in many of which she had participated personally, the woman had never put her own self at risk.

This was more than a pinprick, granting Dallion several seconds to take advantage of.

“Guess I won’t be able to use music anymore,” he said, targeting her other ear with his attack music skills.

Realizing their mistake, the harpsisword flew away, playing a new set of chords to restore the sound protection around its owner. In doing so, it allowed for a direct physical attack. Unlike before, Priscord was in no condition to display the same effectiveness as before.

Got you! Dallion thought, performing a dual multi attack with both blades. Sound and magic flew everywhere, falling upon his enemy like rockets.

Proceeding with the attack, Dallion split into instances. He knew better than to become self-confident at this stage.

Elsewhere in the realm, the diminishing forces of the archduchess were breaking through the encirclement of mountains, destroying them faster than Dallion could erect new ones. No longer concerned with their own safety, they let the aether quills reduce their health, ejecting layer after layer into the real world. All that seemed to be important was the countess' survival.

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#### **TERMINAL HIT**

**Dealt damage is increased by 1000%**

A red rectangle popped up, as Lux pierced one of the three remaining nobles through the chest with a crossbow bolt. There was a momentary pause of stillness, after which the man was ejected from the realm. Unlike the lower level awakened, he wouldn’t just have his powers sealed.

Let her surrender, part of Dallion's consciousness whispered to him. There was no way she could win at this point. A quick surrender would be better for everyone, himself included. At the very least, he wouldn't have to face whatever the horse really was.

Yet, Dallion's memories of the past refused to let him voice the offer. There were very few people he had difficulty forgiving, and Priscord was one of them.

Didn't you use to say the same about the Luors? his better self asked within his mind. You hated them with a passion for what they had done to your family. Now, Aspion is long forgiven and two of his grandchildren are your friends and overseers.

That much was true. He had forgiven them... all of them. But there was one major difference. Aspion had lost his powers, ensuring he could never harm Dallion or anyone again. The former countess was still very much in a combat ready state. The moment she adjusted to the novelty of pain, she was going to strike back with everything he had or, at best, run to return later on.

"Surrender." Dallion spat out the words as he twisted in the air, combining half a dozen skills as he weaved his way to the woman.

If there was a moment for the horse to spring into action, it was now. And still, it didn't.

Refusing to let such an opportunity pass, Dallion swung at Priscord's arm with both blades. The aura sword was easily blocked by the glowing dagger. The harpsword wasn't.

### **CRITICAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

### **ARM SEVERED**

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

It wasn't a permanent effect, but still rendered the woman incapable of fighting, not to mention that it introduced her to a whole new level of pain. The shock was so great that while she didn't voice it, Dallion could see it bubble within her. Fear, anger, and pain sprouted like clusters of large grapes, filling up her entire body.

"You've lost," Dallion said, pressing both blades against her throat.

Deep inside, he knew that even with fifty instances around, this was a mistake. The proper thing was to kill her here and now, yet for some reason he found that he couldn't yet.

"You'll tell me everything you know about the emperor's plans," Dallion said, using his music skills to convince her.

From this distance, her harpswords were no longer capable of providing protection. The threads of music attached to the woman, issuing suggestions like a limiting echo.



“He knew you’d do this,” Priscord said, fighting the music’s effects. “He told me that in the end you’d fail.”

“Seems like he was wrong,” Dallion pressed on. “You’re done. You’ve got no allies, no army, and your trinkets won’t save you anymore.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen the best part.” A forced smile emerged on her face.

A moment later, the horse, which had remained still all this time, exploded. Thousands of magic strands flew in all directions, spreading like lines of bright purple. Dozens of them bounced off the magic thread mesh that Dallion had covered his body with. The rest just kept on going along a straight line, moving through matter as if it were air.

### **YOU HAVE BEEN EJECTED FROM THE REALM**

A green rectangle flashed, throwing Dallion into the real world.

Forced ejection? Dallion fought to regain his bearings.

Once again, he was in the air, facing the archduchess and her armies. He was without feet again, covered in a series of bleeding wounds.

On her side, Priscord’s left ear was also bleeding. Four of her nobles collapsed lifelessly on the ground. The single one that remained rushed in front of the archduchess, still holding his large origami ax.

“You should have finished me off,” Priscord said as her soldiers got into formation. “They might be sealed, but they still have their previous strength and skills. Also, they’re still mine.”

Curiously, the horse was also there, completely unharmed. Concentrating, Dallion saw that the magic threads had largely diminished. Could the emperor have put a spell within the creature? It seemed that way. Despite several attempts, Dallion found that he was incapable of entering the awakened realms again. Each time he tried, a red rectangle would appear with a countdown timer.

Twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes. That was how long he’d be denied access; very similar to the limit imposed after failing awakening trials. This was the first time he was prevented from venturing into any awakened realm, even his personal one.

Veil? Adzorg? Dallion asked within his realm.

What? Veil shouted back. I’m working on it!

We hear you, dear boy, Adzorg said. I was able to recognize some of the symbols within the magic threads, but not enough to figure out what was going on. Like it or not, the emperor was considered the greatest mage for a reason.

“Figured it out?” Priscord asked with glee.

“I still own you.” Dallion responded by using his music skills. “Even with your broken army, you don’t have anyone to stop—”

A green cone flashed for a second, surrounding Dallion. It wasn’t something he was expecting, yet instincts developed during his first days of awakening kicked in. Green cones were guard markers, and there could be only one reason for them to appear.

Splitting into instances, Dallion scattered in all directions. Barely had he done so when a massive ray of destruction burned through Priscord’s army, vaporizing her along with hundreds of others as it targeted Dallion. Out of a hundred instances, only three had managed to survive intact.

Splitting again, Dallion repeated the process. Another ray of destruction flew past. Then another.

More golems? Dallion thought as he summoned all his weapons to him.

These spells were a lot more focused than the previous ones he’d experienced. Rather than relying purely on surprise, someone was targeting him specifically, constantly adapting to his tactics. Dallion slashed the air with his aura sword in an attempt to cast a few protective spells. The spell circles were consumed by another magic blast as soon as they appeared.

“Pesky thing, aren’t you?” A familiar voice asked.

In the distance another figure had risen into the air—a very brightly glowing figure that was over seven feet high.

“You?” Dallion asked, as he kept on combat splitting.

“Who did you expect?” The emperor’s aether echo kept on casting ray after ray, seemingly without any delay or limitation whatsoever. “Jeremy? He’s got more important things right now. Besides, I’m pretty sure I’ll do to you exactly what he has in mind.”

Using his domain ruler powers, Dallion filled the area with mountains. The only thing that did was briefly block the other’s line of sight, before several more rays punctured any obstacle Dallion had created.

“You killed Priscord!” Dallion shouted, attempting to use his music skills on the aether echo. To no surprise the strands bounced off.

“She was getting a bit too ambitious for her own good. If I had let her go on, she might have made a deal with Simon. Besides it’s not like she would be missed. I doubt there’s anyone in the world who gave a damn about her.”

Another mountain rose up, only to be hollowed out with one spell.

“She did her part, though, which was to make sure you couldn’t use the realms to escape.”

Even from this distance, Dallion could see the echo of the emperor grin.

“How did the saying go?” the other went on. “I could defeat anything, but I can’t be everywhere at once? Well—” he rubbed his hands “—as long as you’re here, I don’t have to be.”

Just as he was about to cast a double ray of destruction, a thin vertical line sliced the air and terrain beneath him, forcing the echo to pull back.

A line strike? Dallion wondered. And it wasn’t a standard one, either. It had to be one of the strongest ones Dallion had ever seen.

“I knew you’d get into trouble if I left you alone,” a female voice said.

In the south sky, a dot emerged in the sky. It wasn’t any dot, however; it was a green dot and a gorgon was standing on the top of its head.

#### Chapter 943: The Never-ending Echo

Most of the soldiers stared blankly forward, motionless. The shock of losing their awakening powers, along with the lack of echoes to direct them, made them unable to register the ground shattering around them. The entire terrain kept shifting non-stop, while the sky was filled with spiral attacks, rays of destruction, and dragon breath attacks. Those that were lucky were merely petrified by Euryales glance.

The remaining few that were strong-willed enough to cope with everything that had been taken from them, struggled to survive in a world more hostile than theyve ever known before, with nearly no success.

The ever-shrinking prize, Dallion thought as he finally managed to cast a ray of destruction spell of his own.

The purple beam flew forward through the mountain he had erected to keep the emperors echo from seeing it. Unfortunately, when it came to reaction, Dallion remained slightly outmatched.

#### **SPELL NEGATED**

A second beam, just as large, slammed into Dallions causing both of them to blink out of existence. Whatever the emperor had done to create his aether echo, it was not to be underestimated. Dallion could only assume that there were serious limitations or there would be armies of them roaming the battlefield.

I could help out there, Gleam said through the awakened realms. The dragon actually agrees with me for once.

It was notable that the shardfly had referred to Aquilequia in a non-negative manner, but Dallion strongly disagreed with both of them. After consuming a large part of the Academys magic, she had almost reached level twenty. In terms of speed, that was probably the fastest leveling up Dallion had ever seen or heard of. Unfortunately, that was where her progress ended.

In her current state, neither she nor Gleam would manage to withstand the echos attacks. Dark had to spend years with a Moon to get to where he was, and even so, he appeared a bit lacking.

Stay in the realms, Dallion ordered. Youll get your chance.

*You keep saying that.*

*This isn't our enemy, it's just an echo. We'll fight the real deal soon enough.*

A torrent of air ripped the sky, flying straight for the emperor's echo. This time, instead of deflecting it, the echo cast a series of aether spheres around himself. The first three shattered on contact. The next cracked up before doing the same. The fifth managed to withstand the currents of air, allowing them to slide over.

He's weakening, Dallion said.

Barely had he done so when Dark disappeared, reappearing a dozen feet away a moment later.

Move. Euryale ordered, extending her left hand, while doing a thrust attack with her right.

A point attack flew forward, shattering the final level of protection that the echo had cast. Before the attack could deal any damage, the echo had teleported safely away as well.

He's almost there. Dallion said. We just need to

Stop!

Surprised at the sharpness in her voice, Dallion turned in her direction.

You're weaker as well. The adrenalin rush won't hold you forever.

I'm fine, he lied. He was fully aware of the wounds he had and the impact they were having. Magic was keeping him alive and in a functional state, but in the long run of things that remained an illusion.

Just come here, the gorgon insisted. Even Dark moved in closer to pressure Dallion into making the correct decision. I'm not telling you to stop fighting. Just to rest a bit. We can fight together.

Afraid that agreeing might make the exhaustion fall upon him like a ton of bricks, Dallion hesitated. Splitting into instances, he moved towards her, reaching out for her hand with one. Sadly. The emperor's echo had no intention of making things easy. A new cluster of rays a lot smaller than before flew straight at the trio.

Three things happened at once. Euryale performed a spirk infused spiral attack. Dallion caused a mountain to rise between him and the echo, and Dark cast an illusion spell that transformed them all identical to air.

A series of explosions followed, filling the sky with rocks and dirt. A few moments later, that dirt started falling back to the ground.

When did you learn to do that? Dallion asked, looking at his wife.

The same way I got here. She tapped her arm. The ara creates bonds. I knew you were hurt the moment it happened. I also used her to reach you through the realms. Dark still has to work on his speed.

Hey! The green dragon snorted.

In the distance, another explosion followed, thrusting large amounts of rocks in all directions. Despite signs to the opposite, the aether echo had no intention of slowing down. The mana it had

used was monumental, but as every mage knew, mana was nothing more than stamina given physical form. At its current level, it would be a while before it was done for.

Are you ready for a dance? Euryale asked.

Dance? Dallion repeated the question.

I tried to teach you long ago, but you didnt have the traits for it. The snakes on the gorgons head moved about. Maybe now youll be able to keep up?

For a moment, Dallions exhaustion didnt feel that bad. Without hesitation, he nodded.

Dark, Eury said to the dragon. Ill need wings.

Another illusion spell followed. Dallion and Euryale were all material again, although this time, the gorgon had large green wings coming out of her back. In a way, they reminded Dallion of the blue flame wings that he had frequently used back before he had become a mage.

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Lets go.

More rays shot in their direction. Back on Earth, Dallion never would have thought that the speed of light might turn out to be too slow, but right now, it seemed to be. Thanks to spells, artifacts, and their combined perception, they were able to spot the echos spell in the making and determine the direction the ray would go. The time they had to react proved faster than the time it took for the ray of energy to reach them.

## **DANCE OF LIGHT**

**(+2 Body, +2 Reaction)**

**Just because its adorable. Better not put it to waste.**

A rectangle flashed and disappeared. Dallion could swear that he could see arts, guard, and acrobatics markers flash in similar fashion, marking the movements they had to follow to reach their target unharmed.

Whats dancing without a little music, he thought as he slashed the air with his harpsisword, playing a series of chords in the process.

Youre making things easier. The aether echo moved forward. Dozens of spell circles formed around him, launching projectiles, rays, or bolts of purple lightning.

Spinning through the air, Euryale and Dallion combined spells and combat strikes to continuously counter them. Every now and again a red rectangle would appear as one of them was grazed by an aether shard, though that too would be quickly neutralized by a healing spell.

Rings of water formed around them, as Giaccia too joined in, using as much of her natural magic as she could.

How come Ive never thought like that? Dallion wondered. There was a time when hed gladly combined attacks with others. It seemed so far away that he had completely forgotten.

Like a champagne that had been uncorked, dozens of other memories came flooding in. There were so many more ways he could fight ways involving knowledge out of this world. One word was all it would take for Lux to bombard the echo from a distance with the intensity of a meteor shower. Dallion could change the composition of projectiles and materials, granting them properties similar to rockets, he could fill them with various emotions that would continuously bombard his enemies with emotions of extreme sadness, depression, sapping their will to fight. At the end of the day, he could even recreate heavy artillery or other mid-range weapons from Earth.

Was that the right thing to do, though? The Stars had attempted it, and none of them had managed to achieve what they wanted. The inhabitants of the devastated aura swords had used weapons of emotions and ended up killing each other. Against opponents as crafty as Tiallia, Simon, and Jeremy, any mass destruction capabilities would be a double-edged sword.

To a degree, the same could be said about melee combat. Dallion had no doubt that all three of his enemies were observing him through various means, taking notes of anything that could be to their advantage. There was one thing that they lacked, though none of them had anyone like Euryale by their side.

Aether sabers surrounded the echo as they got close. Dallion expected him to summon a weapon of his own, but no such thing happened. That was somewhat weird. For someone who had all the skills at a level twenty percent higher than they were supposed to, it should have been easy.

Out of sixteen sabers, ten flew towards Dallion, while the rest concentrated on Euryale. That was a rookie mistake. Everyone knew that gorgons were better in combat than humans. More than likely, Jeremy suspected that Dallion's level advantage made him more dangerous.

Moving his arms so fast that they appeared to quadruple, Dallion parried the flying blades. Each strike created a spell circle behind it, as well as a trail of water. Giaccia was doing a good job propelling drops of that at the echo, even if they were easily stopped by concentrated cubes of aether that appeared and disappeared.

On her part, Euryale was focusing purely on attack, dancing between strikes with the elegance of an awakened ballerina, while performing point blank spiral attacks with ease.

Its amusing that both of you are here, the echo said, still managing to cast rays of destruction in the course of combat. Of course, Dallion took full advantage of his combat splitting to make sure that neither he nor Euryale would suffer as a result. You're aware that you can't kill me, he continued. You've seen it happen before.

Each of the words had subtle strands of music within them. Most people wouldn't even have noticed, but the former Duchess Elazni had made Dallion aware of such approaches.

Using music so late in the game? Dallion countered with his own music skill. Things must have become tough for you.

Hardly. The echo persisted. My original was like you once.

Eight of the sabers merged together, creating a fan. Its force was significantly greater than before, chopping the arm off one of Dallion's instances. Naturally, Dallion chose another to become reality and split again.

He had someone he loved and would go into battle with her. Eventually he saw the truth.

And what might that be? Euryale asked, eyes wide open in an attempt to petrify the echo. Sadly, its level of magic made it impossible.

That nothing lasts forever, the echo replied, casting another ray of destruction. From this distance, it was able to slightly singe the side of her right arm before she could fully evade. Thankfully, the wound was light. Only one could pass through the gate. Everyone close to those that do will die then or after.

In fifty instances, Dallion thrust his harpsisword right at the echo. In forty-nine of them, the blade shattered through dozens of barriers, failing to fully break through to its target. In one, it succeeded.

Got you! Dallion shouted victoriously. Caution made him maintain the rest of his instances a bit longer, and it was a good thing that he had.

The echo looked at its wound. The death had triggered some sort of after-spell effect, causing its entire body to flash in a bright purple light. That wasn't all, though. Hundreds of aether rays shot out in all directions, burning through everything. There was no escaping from that. The moment Dallion caught a glimpse, he quickly switched to one of the failed attacks. There was no way he'd lose Euryale in such a way.

You saw it, didn't you?

More spell circles emerged, doubling the amount of aether sabers. Dallion attempted to slice the threads of as many of the spells as he could, but the echo was annoyingly fast.

That's why no one has managed to kill the Emperor of Tamin. Many have tried, some even succeeded, yet they saw as you that killing me meant they would die as well.

There was no denying it. That was a neat trick. And yet, Dallion knew that wasn't always the case. During the last imperial ceremony, the fake emperor had really died.

I saw you die once, he said.

You're missing the point. Why don't you look at me closer? I'll allow it.

A purple rectangle suddenly appeared above the echo's head.

### **TAMIN III**

**Health: 0%**

**Traits:**

- **AWAKENING 121**

- **BODY 121**

- **MIND 121**

- **REACTION 121**

- **PERCEPTION 121**

- **EMPATHY 121**

- **MAGIC 121**

**Skills**

- **ATTACK**

- **GUARD**

- **ATHLETICS**

- **ACROBATICS**

- **FORGING**

- **CARVING**

- **ARTS**

- **SCHOLAR**

- **MUSIC**

- **HERBALISM**

- **ZOOLOGY**

- **SPELLCRAFT**

**Weakness: UNKNOWN**

Chapter 944: Item Echo

What is that? Dallion asked in his personal realm.

The last time he had seen the echo's rectangle, its level had been at a hundred and twenty. There could be no doubt that it was an aether echo—Jeremy himself had confirmed it during his conversation. Had he found a way to boost its level? At the current range, that would take insane amounts of magic threads. Dallion wasn't sure that even Moonstones could achieve the effect. Could it be that Jeremy had a Moon backing him?

I'm not sure, Adzorg replied. It's definitely an echo, but I have no explanation how—

It's an item echo, a new voice said from Dallion's realm.

There could be no doubt to whom it belonged. As Dallion had suspected, the archbishop had been listening in to his realm conversations. Right now, there was a more pressing question he needed to ask.

*What's an item echo?*

It's an item that has properties of an echo, the archbishop replied. Not the best name, but it was descriptive enough. Jeremy took the idea from the protectors. As you've probably seen, he's always good at protecting things.

An item echo? Dallion could almost swear he had come across something similar in the past. The principle was both ingenious and terrifying—the more people killed the echo the stronger it got. That was the reason all its traits had jumped to a hundred-twenty-one. Where had things started,



though? The skill limit was a hundred, suggesting that if they advanced the same fashion that traits did, the echo had gone through twenty-one improvements. There was no telling how many emperors it had impersonated, how many forms it had been forced to take on, but the number fell well below twenty.

While Dallion was considering what to do, Euryale used her dragon wings to fly closer and attack again.

Aether barriers appeared between her and the echo, only to be shattered by spark infused sun gold tendrils emerging from her armor. Normally, one would be pleased with such progress, though not Dallion. Hadn't the gorgon seen what would happen if she killed the aether echo outright?

Unwilling to take the risk, he performed a point attack with one of his instances, aimed at the front of the gorgon's hand. The strike hit the metal tendrils of her armor, moving them back. The extreme precision kept it from hurting her hand or even damage the armor. It was only the attack that didn't make contact.

"Go back!" he shouted, causing a column of rock to emerge right under the aether echo.

One ray of destruction spell directed down, and the column had transformed into a deep hole.

"Why?" Euryale asked.

"If you kill him, he'll explode," Dallion went with the easiest to convey answer. "I've a better thing in mind."

Another column of earth emerged.

"It's too slow to reach me," the aether echo cast another destructive spell.

Determined to continue, Dallion flew back, doubling the radius of the column. Once again, it shot up. This time, two rays of destruction were cast.

"Even without spells, I can evade it." A faint ring of amusement emanated from the being. Similar to its original, it not only wanted to defeat Dallion, but humiliate him in the process.

The column doubled in size again.

Moving ever so slightly forward, the echo of the emperor cast two more rays of destruction. Most of the column was destroyed, leaving nothing more than a thin crescent intact. It was a single moment of overconfidence, but one moment was all it usually took.

Aqui, Dallion thought.

The large form of the great dragon emerged from the sliver of earth. While not the full size as during the dragon hunt, her mouth was more than enough to swallow the echo whole. Had anything else tried to attack, even Dallion using his domain ruler abilities to shoot out earth spikes, the echo would have had ample time to counter or evade. Yet, only the golden colossus was able to match the speed of a level nineteen great dragon of Dararr.

Aquilequia's jaws slammed shut.

**AQUILEQUIA has assimilated the ECHO, increasing her awakening level by 21.**

**AQUILEQUIA has increased her awakening level to 40.**

"That was your plan?" Euryale turned to Dallion as her snakes moved about in disapproving fashion.

"Sort of."

In truth, he hadn't wanted the dragon to get involved, but his knowledge of dragons had kicked in. Since they were magic creatures, similar to the aether echo, they had the power to assimilate the magic while killing it. As the outcome had shown, once the assimilation was done, there weren't enough magic threads left to trigger a spell or improve the entity. He also kept a few instances at the ready should things not turn out as he hoped.

"It was a gamble." He smoothened the terrain beneath him.

Within seconds, the scars of battle were swept away, bringing the domain back to its original state. There were no soldiers, many of the main structures were gone—even if Dallion did his best to prevent as many of them as possible from getting destroyed—but the domain itself had managed to survive. Sadly, that wasn't a given.

"Aqui, Dark, get us out of here!" Dallion ordered. Gleam, can you reach the south through the realms?

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Sure, the shardfly replied. Why the rush?

*The archbishop knows where we are.*

That was more than enough. With Dallion's inability to venture into awakening realms, there would never be a better chance to strike him with a mass spell rocket. And even if for whatever reason Simon wasn't inclined to do so, Jeremy wouldn't have similar scruples.

The dark green wings detached from Euryale, transforming back into the dragon's full form. Aquilequia eyed the dragon, then—confirming that he wasn't a great like her—let out a dismissive snort. At the end of the day, dragons remained territorial creatures.

Subject to the effects of gravity once more, Euryale grabbed hold of a talon on Dark's foot, then hurled herself up in a feat of acrobatics that landed her at the base of the creature's neck.

"Let's go," she said.

What about them? The green dragon asked. Won't they come along?

"They will. We're just the bait to keep them safe."

She turned out to be right. Not half a minute after the assimilation of the aether echo, a series of dots were visible in the sky. They started by targeting the Academy domain, then continued along a

straight line, following Dark's flight path. Jeremy clearly didn't care about the damage he inflicted on his own territory, all in the slight possibility he might affect a world conquering rival.

Aquilequia, though, took a completely different path. Her speed allowed her to take a slightly longer route. It avoided the path of the rockets, but came with its own risks—they had to fly over the edge of the nymphs' domain.

For twenty minutes explosions glassed large areas of the world, rendering the livable area less and less. Conquest didn't matter, it was all about making the enemy target smaller and smaller. As long as one power remained, there really was no reason to care about anything else. After all, there was nearly no limit to the power of a Moon—everything destroyed could be easily fixed.

The rocket attacks stopped just as abruptly as they started. There was no apparent logic to them, but Dallion welcomed the brief moment of respite. Despite having won a few battles, he didn't feel like it. While he had gained a lot, not in the least several Moonstones, one of which he didn't have before, he had lost much of what he had gained and also proven to everyone that he was vulnerable. Over the next twenty-three hours he could barely call himself a domain ruler, leaving him open to attacks on all sides. Also, he was severely wounded. Magic and a high body trait had taken off the edge, but even so, the healing process would be long at a time when every second counted. For the next few weeks, or even months, he'd have to conduct the war safely away from the action—just like all the other three conquerors were doing.

Hey, Pan said from Dallion's personal realm all of a sudden. You needed me for something?

I could have used your advice... The copyette was so late that Dallion wasn't even angry.

I found some more spies, the other said unapologetically. A few dozen more, to be precise. There were at least two in most of your major settlements posing as furies.

*You've been working hard.*

It made sense that they would be furies. The race had the greatest amount of freedom, not to mention that there still was an open invitation when it came to them joining. Diroh had taken her role seriously and despite a few minor misjudgments here and there, was on track to reunifying the entire race; without the crimson furies, of course. Even so, having several dozen copyettes lurking about was alarming.

Not exactly, Pan said. All of them openly revealed themselves and surrendered.

*What?*

*None of them fought, none of them even tried to run. It took me all this time to gather them in one place.*

Veil? Dallion was furious.

What? The overseer shouted back. With everything going on, we thought it would be better not to distract you with stuff. Besides, it was a pretty unanimous decision. Even sis and Hannah agreed.

*Who was against?*

*Vihrogon. He said that if you can't handle this much pressure, the war might as well be lost.*

Dallion felt conflicted by this. On one hand, he would have preferred to have known, though he had to admit that learning it during his fight at the Academy would have made him second guess a lot of his actions. There was a non-zero chance that he might not have defeated Priscord, let alone the item echo.

*Did Eury know?*

No one answered.

*Did she know?*

No way I'm getting involved in that, Veil said, suggesting that she did. Just get back here, okay? Only because you're done doesn't mean the fighting is over.

By the time Dallion returned to Alliance, his forces had gained a lot of what they had lost. The empire had consolidated its territory as well—what was left of Priscord's domain was distributed among the neighboring archdukes.

With everything said and done, Dallion's overall gains weren't as much as he had hoped. It was by far not enough to increase his awakening level, and just slightly more than before the empire's attack. Hannah and Vihrogon had done a masterful job commanding his forces. The dryad had secured all the Order's former territory, using the southern shardflies to eliminate all remaining strongholds. Currently, it was more or less official that the east part of the continent was Order free. All that Dallion could do was lay down and endure the long treatment process.

Everything had been set up for him. Veil had constructed a new chamber above the war room, which contained a giant bed and pretty much nothing else. The overseer had made sure that there be as few items as possible to keep chatting to a minimum. All mages with healing magic that could be spared were put on standby, and ready to start assisting.

The first thing that Dallion did upon being transported by the overseer to the hospital room was to dismiss all of them. Even so, there was someone he couldn't dismiss as easily.

"Now it's my turn to take care of you," Euryale said, sitting on a small chair by the bed.

Dallion let out a dry laugh. It had barely been half a day since his battle with Priscord and he already felt restless.

"You can stop with the illusion." The gorgon said.

The comment made Dallion glance at his feet. As far as anyone could tell, they were in perfect condition. There were no wounds on the skin. He could move them however he wished. He could even stand up and walk if he wanted to. In truth, they were still gone.

“I like them better that way,” he replied. “When an illusion is strong enough, it’s no different from the real thing.”

“Then it wouldn’t be an illusion.” There was a momentary pause. “You know you scared me on this one.”

Dallion nodded. Even now, he could feel the emotions emanating from her. There was no point in arguing that she had made him feel the same way many times before. What was important right now was that both of them were here.

“I’ll have to—” she began but was instantly interrupted.

“No,” he said firmly.

“Dal.”

“I know what you’re going to say.” Although he was a lot calmer and more mature than years ago, mentally he still clenched his fists. “I won’t let you.”

“If no one leads your forces, rumors will start to spread. You know how good all of them are at that.”

“Vihrogon can do it, or even Hannah. I’m not letting you put yourself in so much danger.”

“Even after I saved your life?” Her snakes twirled as a wave of annoyance emanated from her—annoyance at his stubbornness mostly.

“Because you saved me.” He reached out to her. “Can’t you just stay? There’s less of the world every day. Can’t we just spend some time the two of us?” If he had his ability to enter the awakened realms, he would have taken her there right now. “Just for a day.”

“To have that day, I must be out there,” she countered. “I’ll be back soon. You’ll know where I am every step of the way.”

“No, I won’t.” Dallion forced a smile. “I’ll never make you carry an echo.”

There were many more things that could have been said. And they would have been if suddenly Dallion didn’t feel a new presence entering the city’s domain. Even in this time of war, it wasn’t rare for a small group of people to approach a city that hadn’t been there moments ago. In this case, though, the presence he felt had deliberately made its way to Alliance.

“Hello, Dal,” the archbishop said, staying steadily a mile above Dallion’s head. “I’m here to surrender to you.”

#### Chapter 945: A Final Option

All of Dallion’s top awakened were gathered in the center of Alliance. It had taken them less than a second from Dallion’s order to do so. Veil, Gloria, and the other overseers had combined their

efforts, transporting them as much as they could within their own minor domains of influence. The rest of the awakened had done as well.

All the furies in Alliance formed a wide circle around the archbishop. On rooftops below, five times as many gorgons, some of them with rocket crossbows, had taken aim at the intruder. Hannah, March, and the rest of the former Icepicker elite were also present, as were Vihrogon and Pan. The only two missing were those that Dallion had explicitly forbidden to be there. While Di's growth had been impressive under Adzorg's tutelage, she had no chance against a domain ruler, especially one of such power.

So much for my rest. Dallion summoned all his weapons and gear.

Simultaneously, he also removed the roof and ceiling above him, allowing him to get a good look at Simon. The boy seemed more or less like before, wearing the white attire he had been with on his island. His eyes had become baggy, as if he hadn't slept for months. Given his traits, that wasn't supposed to be the case.

"Just the welcome I expected." Slowly, the archbishop floated lower. The flight spell he was using was so old and inefficient that even the Learning Hall history tomes had more recent versions. Still it did its job. "Hello, Aklafl," he addressed Pan, who had floated up, magic symbols covering his body.

"I go by Pan now," the copyette said.

"Pan. The one who got away. I spent millennia trying to catch you, and you always managed to sneak away."

Knowing he needed to make an appearance, Dallion split into instances and flew up with one of them.

"Why are you here?" he asked, holding the harpsisword tightly in his right hand.

"I told you already." The archbishop didn't blink. "I'm here to surrender."

Dallion waited.

"Your push made it clear that I was the least threat. I have enough strength to keep any of them from going at me directly, but I'm in no position to attack. The Order was never built that way."

"Right. You built it to control."

"It was the most efficient method, and for a while it worked. Sadly, everything static has a bell curve."

The archbishop and Dallion were at the same level now, standing ten feet from one another. Even so, if it came to a fight, there was no telling who would win. Dallion's condition was pretty bad, but even if it wasn't the archbishop had the uncanny ability to withstand any attack.

"You know the irony of it?" he asked, glancing north for a moment. "My original plan was to hand over the reins to Jeremy. He'd become the new archbishop—a shining beacon for the world to aspire to."

“And you would have been the one controlling him behind the scene,” Dallion finished the sentence.

“Why does everyone assume I want to control everything?” Simon sighed. “You, Jeremy, Tiallia, even dear Aklafl... I mean Pan was certain my true intention was to assume control.”

“Wasn’t it?”

“No, it was to make sure that no one does.”

While talking, the two kept on slowly floating towards the ground. At present, they were a few hundred feet from Dallion’s bedroom. Euryale was standing there, now wearing her sun gold armor. Should anything suspicious happen, she could easily leap up and turn the archbishop into a pincushion; or at least try to.

“How did you find me?” Dallion switched to a more practical question.

“I can see the future, remember?” The tone was dead serious. “I used a lot to determine when would be a good time to approach you and where you’ll be.” He looked at Dallion’s feet. All the world saw his trousers continuing to a fancy pair of boots. The archbishop wasn’t just anyone, though. “That looks quite serious. I can help heal it if you want. I can also remove your bleeding wounds. I know how annoying those could be.”

Dallion had no intention of trusting the archbishop. If he had sensed the slightest excuse to attack, he would have done so on the spot. Yet, there didn’t seem to be anything but sincerity coming from the boy.

“I vow that I have come here with the intent to help you and don’t plan to harm you or anything or one in your domain,” the archbishop proclaimed.

It took a lot of conviction to make an unrestricted Moon vow. Dallion had seen the consequences should it be broken. On the other hand, Simon was capable of many things that no one else was. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that he knew of a way to break a Moon vow and remain unharmed.

“You don’t expect me to trust you, right?” Dallion concentrated. Attack and ranged markers appeared on the archbishop’s neck.

“You don’t have a choice not to. When I said I determined the perfect moment, I meant it. You’re a lot weaker than usual. You’re blocked from entering any realm, and all your assorted subjects and familiars don’t have the power to kill me. And that includes the dragons, doesn’t it Aquilequia?”

Intense dread emanated from within Dallion’s realm.

“Hear me out and you’ll understand what’s really going on,” the archbishop continued. “If you’re not convinced after that, I’ll go back to my ivory tower and never meddle with you again.”

“Alright. I’m listening.”

“No.” The archbishop shook his head. “No one else can hear. No item, no ally, not Aklaflf, not even your wife.”

Interesting request and definitely not something that Dallion would agree to. It wasn’t so much that he was afraid the archbishop might try to kill him, but rather that he found it useless. The only reason someone would want to discuss something in private was to offer a deal that didn’t include anything else. If Dallion was to guess, it would be to form a permanent alliance: Dallion would receive support and potentially the world, but only as long as he didn’t take the final step of becoming a Moon. Or maybe it was the opposite? It was possible for Simon to have changed his mind. The only way to stop anyone else from becoming a Moon was for him to be one. In exchange he’d owe a debt of eternal gratitude, supporting Dallion in anything he did as world emperor.

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“Nice try.” Dallion remained firm. “Say it here or—”

“Are you sure you want what happened to your grandfather to happen to everyone else?”

The question felt like an ice shard piercing Dallion’s chest and stomach.

“We’ll have a chat,” Dallion said loudly as he slid on the blocker ring given to him by Pierce from the Order of the Twelve Suns. “Watch for surprises.”

Before anyone could react, Dallion cast a series of aether spheres around them. A moment later, he turned them opaque.

“This wasn’t what I had in mind,” the archbishop said after a while. “But I guess it’ll do.”

“Just make your offer.” Dallion narrowed his eyes.

“That’s it? No questions, nothing you’re curious about?”

“You’re the one with all the prophecies. You tell me.”

Simon kept staring at Dallion for several seconds, after which he broke out laughing.

“You really are one in a million,” he said, floating closer to the center of the aether sphere. “I know I’m aware of my situation. It took Jeremy centuries, but he finally succeeded. I’m out of Moonstones. You, on the other hand, aren’t.”

“You came here for that?” Dallion had to think it over several times just to make sure that this wasn’t a trick. “You really are a Moonstone addict.”



“Call it what you want. It takes Moonstones to see the future. When things were calmer, I could do with one for years, decades, once even over a century. Now that you triggered the endgame, I need to focus a lot more.”

Disgust mixed with pity. Was this really the oldest awakened in the world—the one whose name had been feared and revered for millennia? He didn’t look like a wreck, but he didn’t have to be. How else could someone describe someone who had surrendered everything for just a few shards of Moonstone?

“You’re doing it again, aren’t you?” Simon shrugged. “Coming to the wrong conclusions. I know what it looks like, but unlike you and everyone else, I know it doesn’t matter. Frankly, if it was just about the rush of power, I would have stopped ages ago. Even the visions are a means and not the goal.”

“Sure.” Dallion kept his distance. “You can stop anytime you want.”

“Anyone can, because all this is a game.”

A torrent of fear emanated from Simon. It was the strongest emotion that Dallion had ever felt coming from the archbishop, though there was no reason for it to be.

“Yeah, we are just pawns moving about for the Moon’s amusement,” Dallion began.

“No. Not their game. It’s a game game.”

This made even less sense.

“What’s a game game?” Dallion asked after several seconds of hesitation.

“An actual game. Maybe it’s a video game, maybe it’s more metaphysical, maybe it’s just a dream. Bottom line is that it isn’t real.”

“Yeah, right. And when we die, we just restart?”

“Isn’t it funny how you’ve instantly accepted the whole concept of awakened realms, living items, magic, and talking deities, but can’t even consider my suggestion seriously?”

“Because it’s bullshit.”

Thinking about it, there were a number of similarities. The rectangles, the whole concept of leveling up, the awakening trials, the achievements, the skills and skill markers. But did that prove anything? Otherworlders who weren’t familiar with Earth-based video games wouldn’t make the comparison. Yet in the back of Dallion’s mind, a grain of doubt had sprouted. There had been many instances of awakening trials that had pretended to be a reflection of reality. When it came down to it, he only had the Moon’s word that any of the non-human races were actually otherworlders. It was only their word that any non-human was actually real. Would that mean that all of Dallion’s memories in this world were a fabrication? Was his entire relationship and marriage to a make-belief entity that didn’t exist? The thought alone tightened his heart to the point it hurt.

“Prove it,” he said.

“Gladly.” There was no smile on Simon’s face. Clearly, he too wasn’t pleased with the situation. “Rectangles should only be visible in the awakened realms, right?”

“Except when magic is involved,” Dallion said on instinct. “Or you’re a domain ruler.”

“Alright, so a low level awakened without the magic trait shouldn’t see them in the real world, right?”

Dallion nodded, already fearful of what the next question might be.

“And still, you have, haven’t you?”

There it was—exactly what he feared it would be. In the last few months, there had been more and more such instances—rectangles and markers appearing where they shouldn’t have. With everything else going on, Dallion had taken it in stride. The occurrences had easily been explained away: due to magic, or his domain ruler nature, or even the Moonstones he was keeping within his realm. Yet, there was one instance that couldn’t be explained away: the red rectangle that had appeared during his first chainling hunt. Back then, Dallion wasn’t even a double digit awakened. There was no way it should have appeared in the real world... but it had.

“You did, didn’t you?” Simon pushed on. “When it happened to me, I thought the world would end. I was a lot younger than you at the time. The realization made me fear that everything would go dark, and I’d find myself alone in the darkness. It didn’t, of course. Life continued as normal, and I continued along with it, but all the time I kept on thinking about it.”

“You’re telling me that all this is fake?”

“No. I’m telling you that it’s real and fake at the same time.”

The dread that had held Dallion loosened its grip, replaced by confusion.

“What the hell does that mean?!”

“Somehow, we became part of the game. While we’re here, everything’s real. The rules are perfect and nearly unbreakable. We’re players, but we’re also characters. As long as we remain alive, we can continue living a calm and peaceful life and enjoy it for as long as we wish.”

“Until someone finishes the game.”

“Until someone finishes the game,” Simon nodded. “Or the void brings everything to an end.”

“You’re insane.”

He had to be. This had to be a delusion that Simon had. It would definitely explain his behavior: his detachment from anything, the low value he put on lives, and his desire to prevent anyone from passing the sixth game, regardless of the cost. After all, if this was a game—as he claimed—the people in the world weren't real.

“Jeremy reacted the way you did. I think that was the reason he betrayed me. After all, if this was a game, there could be only one winner, and he was going to make sure that the winner was him.”

In Dallion's mind, every concept he had of reality kept crumbling down. He kept on thinking back to his first days in this world, trying to find anything that would disprove the notion of a game. Yet just as one could explain everything in the world with the powers of the Moons, there was just as much evidence to prove it was a game.

I don't need this! Dallion felt warm sweat cover his face and neck. He liked his life! It had been full of joy and sadness, loss, and pain, but also wonder and achievement. He had done things he never believed possible, even in the confines of this world. He had found companions, friends... he had even gotten married to someone he loved more than his own life. There was no way he'd let anyone take that away from him.

Scenes passed before his mind's eye: everyone he met, the awakening trials he went through, the companions he had saved, the conversations with the Green Moon, the fights, the shrines within the aura sword—

Dallion's train of thought suddenly came to a complete halt, like a car spotting a dog crossing the road. He had managed to find a flaw—possibly two—in the archbishop's logic. The emperor must have found it as well, which had led to him splitting off to do his own thing. If this whole world was nothing but a game, why would it end one gate early? A different Moon guided Dallion each time. Since there were seven Moons, there had to be seven gates, yet conquering the world would only lead past the sixth.

You almost had me. He let out an internal sigh of relief.

“Alright.” he said, using his music skills to maintain the perception of dread coming from him. “How do we stop him?” If the archbishop was offering his help, Dallion planned to take advantage of it.

#### Chapter 947: Green Moon's Farewell

The silence in the aether sphere was so intense that Dallion could hear every breath and heartbeat. So far, he had done a good job pretending to believe what the other had told him. Hopefully, that was going to be enough to fool the archbishop.

“We don't,” Simon said.

In his mind Dallion said a lot of things, most of them curses. What he voiced was completely different.

“I don’t follow.” He floated closer to the center of the sphere. “I thought you said that if someone wins, it’s all over.”

“There’s another way to achieve what you want. A direct boon, if you will.”

That’s what you told Tiallia, didn’t you? Dallion frowned. Considering what had happened to her entire race, Dallion wasn’t terribly enthusiastic about that option.

“The Moon emblem,” the archbishop continued. “All hopefuls are given one. I’m no exception and neither are all previous conquerors. Those with enough drive have even completed theirs. I heard that you’re doing pretty well with yours.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear. I’m still missing a few,” Dallion lied.

“Everyone is missing a few, but I’ve foreseen that together there are enough to make a set.”

That filled Dallion with even less enthusiasm. A voice in the back of his mind had already started urging him to reject the offer and continue with more important things. Then again, there was the matter of the archbishop’s assistance.

“You’re suggesting we team up with them?” Even his level of the music skill proved unable to hide the skepticism.

“There can be only one winner in the conventional way, but unlike what they say through their echoes and domains, no one is certain they’ll be the one to make it. Right now, Jeremy and Tiallia are engaged in a series of battles all along the western shore of the continent. Tia decided to take advantage of the minor clash between you and the emperor, so she went all out in the battle for first place. Jeremy considers you weak, and me done with, so he responded.”

“So, whoever wins there wins the world.”

“Not quite. They must win fast. If the battle grinds on, the winner might reach a point at which they’ll be weaker than you. That’s why they are putting everything on the first clash. There’s a good chance that by tomorrow, things will be clear, yet they aren’t right now.”

There was an obvious danger of allying with someone dedicated to an insane belief. The archbishop’s mania that the world—or the “game” as he believed—would end had made him a master of knowing the right time and the right actions to force a desired outcome. Compared to him, the emperor was like an apprentice, though, as the current state of the world showed, sometimes the apprentice could outwit the master.

“We form an alliance and use my Moon emblem to challenge the Moons together,” Dallion mused.

“That’s the simple version, yes. They’ll have their doubts, of course, but if we ask them right now, they’ll have no choice but to accept.”

“That’s why you surrendered to me, didn’t you?”

“The third and fourth combined might prove stronger than the second.” Simon nodded. “Or maybe the first.”

“And because they’re currently fighting between themselves, they can’t easily unite against us.”

“Oh, they could, but would they trust each other? What if this all is an elaborate plot to eliminate them before fighting continues between the remaining three?”

Only because you’re the one who made the alliance, Dallion said to himself. He was putting a lot of faith in a person who was scheming, addicted to Moonstones, and with questionable beliefs. And still, he had a lot of knowledge that Dallion could use. In the end, this is what it came to: everyone was using everyone; the question was who would gain the bigger advantage.

“Working with Tiallia and Jeremy,” Dallion said.

“Trust me, it beats the alternative.”

“And what do I have to do in exchange?”

Anger emanated from the archbishop. Clearly, he was a lot worse at controlling his emotions in his current state.

“I must be able to see some of the details,” he replied without directly answering the question. “Also, I’ll need one to heal you. You could use it in theory as well, but you won’t be as efficient.”

“Alright,” Dallion agreed. In his mind, he had gone over his options dozens of times. “One more thing, though. You’ll tell me everything before we go.”

“I can talk while I heal.”

“And if there’s a face to face, I’m not going alone.”

“It’s a bad idea. Anyone you bring will put you at risk.”

“I trust them more than you,” Dallion said in a firm tone. Then he removed his limiting ring.

Aqui, he said within his realm. I’ll need you to bring me the Moonstones. Giaccia will give them—

No! The dragon cut him off. I’m not going in the same realm as him.

*Aqui, it'll be okay. I'll be here and—*

No! she said adamantly. He bred us for our hearts! I'm not going anywhere near!

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Veil, you bring them, Dallion ordered.

*Are you sure? There's no telling what he'll do with them.*

*I know exactly what he'll do with them. We made a deal, so bring them. Oh, and don't take the cyan one.*

Sure, Dal. There was not a single note of enthusiasm in Veil's voice.

A few seconds later, the aether sphere dissolved into nothing, bringing Dallion and the archbishop into view again. The number of troops surrounding the area had doubled, all eagerly awaiting the command to attack. Such a command never came. Instead, Dallion floated back down to his room, accompanied by the archbishop.

When Veil appeared, handing over the Moonstones to Dallion, who in turn gave them to Simon, the healing began.

Under the watchful eye of Euryale and Pan, the archbishop removed one by one the permanent effects covering Dallion's body. The magic spell he used was unlike anything Dallion had seen—"more divine than spell" as Adzorg put it.

As each wound was burned out of existence, leaving smooth skin behind, a green rectangle flashed, informing Dallion of the result. And during the entire time, Simon explained the intricacies of the plan. For safety and security reasons, a bubble of silence had been cast around the room, maintained by none other than Pan. The copyette trusted the archbishop as much as Dallion, still maintaining hundreds of magic symbols all over his body.

After close to an hour, all the bleeding wounds had been removed from Dallion's body. Now it was time to restore his feet.

"I'll need you to hold him down for this," Simon told Euryale.

"It will hurt, I take it," Dallion said, preparing himself mentally.

"It will if you want it done in a minute."

Dallion didn't, but he also didn't want to delay. A minute in intense pain. For an awakened, that sounded like an eternity. Hopefully, Simon was using a metaphor and it wasn't actually going to take a full minute.

“Pan,” Dallion said as he lay down on the bed so that the stumps of his legs were beyond the end. “Did you go through this when you tried to conquer the world?”

“The leg healing bit? No.” The copyette responded with a touch of humor. “The other stuff... at this point, I can say I did.”

“You can only tell someone who already knows,” Dallion said reflectively. “How come you could tell me?” He raised his head, looking at Simon.

“I didn’t vow not to.” The archbishop was rubbing his hands, covering them in a pale green glow. “Unlike him, I never tried to take over the world.” He took a step closer to the bed. “You better get ready now.”

The pain came in waves. The first few seconds there was almost none at all. Yet as time went by, it kept building up more and more until soon it was more than Dallion could bear. Concentrating, he tried to use his music skills to negate the effects of the pain, or at the very least, decrease them. That lasted for possibly ten seconds more, when his body reflexively made an attempt to break free. It was only Euryale that kept him from succeeding. The gorgon held his hands firmly pinned to the bed, while Simon pulled out, bit by bit, a new set of feet from Dallion’s legs.

Half of Dallion’s body had gone completely limp and unresponsive, yet the pain felt as if someone was stretching every muscle, nerve, and tendon in his legs far beyond their breaking point. The only thing preventing him from yelling for the archbishop to stop was the burning desire not to give him the satisfaction. Sweat covered his entire body. Magic threads emerged from his pores in an attempt to create a protective mesh over his skin.

The pain seemed to last for hours, simultaneously knocking Dallion out and forcing him into consciousness again. Finally, he felt a slight decrease. It wasn’t much, but a sure sign that his suffering had peaked.

“There you go.” Simon wiped the sweat from his forehead. Clearly, he had also exerted himself. Even so, he seemed in a markedly better state. If nothing else, the bags beneath his eyes were gone. “Rest a bit. I’ll send my offer to Jeremy.”

“Not Tiallia?” Dallion asked through gritted teeth.

“Tiallia has already accepted. I suppose having her sister helped.”

“Wait! Tell me—” Dallion tried to voice the question, but his stamina had reached its limits. Once his body realized it wasn’t fighting for its survival, his consciousness shut down. After what seemed like a second, Dallion woke up.

Looking up he saw a star-filled night sky. Panic set in, along with the fear that Simon had gone to the meeting without him.

“Eury!” Dallion jumped to his feet. “Pan! Who left...” his words trailed off.

There was a person in the room. Funny that it was only now that Dallion noticed. The person was a dryad, standing at the window, looking outside.

“Vihrogon?” Dallion asked.

“Close.” The dryad turned around. It didn’t take Dallion more than a second to figure out who it was.

“Felygn,” he whispered. “I thought it was strange that the room was removed again. How long was I out?”

“Eleven seconds, give or take. Simon did a number on you. After your latest bout of recklessness, you deserved it, though.”

“Everyone’s a critic.” Dallion shifted the weight on his legs. His feet felt normal and completely pain-free. Given that it was a dream, there was no other way for it to be. “Was he right?”

“Is that what you want to ask me?”

“Will you answer if I do?”

The Green Moon laughed.

“You’re leaning.”

The room suddenly shifted. Dallion didn’t notice it happening, yet he knew the difference between where he had been a moment ago and where he was now. The present room was identical to his university dorm, at least as far as he could remember. The only thing that remained the same was Felygn, who stood at the window in his dryad form.

“This brings back memories, doesn’t it?” the Moon asked.

“I’ve never known you to be sentimental.”

“Who said I can’t be? Don’t worry, you’re not in any trouble as far as we are concerned. I just thought I’d take this chance to have a few words with you. There’s no telling whether I might have another.”

“So, things are that bad?”

“Only one can own the world. There’s no telling if that someone would be you.”

A farewell from a Moon. It was the last thing Dallion expected, but he appreciated the gestures. His opinion and relationship with the Moons had gone through many stages. Initially there was awe, then fear, then annoyance that they let mass-scale pain and suffering happen before their eyes. Now, he felt them distantly close in a way that words could barely describe.

“Thanks for bringing my race back,” Felygn said. “I appreciate it.”

“You know I didn’t do it for you.”



“I know. But you also did it for them. Many were given an opportunity, but you’re the only one who not only tried, but did it. For that, I’ll give you a final boon.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for that?”

“Maybe. But no matter what, I’ll always be with you as long as you call.”

“What does—” The scene disappeared. Instantly, Dallion opened his eyes, lurching his upper body upwards.

He was back in his bedroom with Euryale sitting on the bed next to him.

“Don’t rush,” she said, gently caressing his cheek. “You can rest a bit longer.”

Dallion smiled, relaxing back down. Yes, he had a bit longer. Yet deep inside, he feared that he’d never see Felygn again, not as a friend in any event.

Chapter 946: Green Moon's Farewell

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“We don’t,” Simon said.

In his mind Dallion said a lot of things, most of them curses. What he voiced was completely different.

“I don’t follow.” He floated closer to the center of the sphere. “I thought you said that if someone wins, it’s all over.”

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That’s what you told Tiallia, didn’t you? Dallion frowned. Considering what had happened to her entire race, Dallion wasn’t terribly enthusiastic about that option.

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“Don’t believe everything you hear. I’m still missing a few,” Dallion lied.

“Everyone is missing a few, but I’ve foreseen that together there are enough to make a set.”

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"Everyone's a critic." Dallion shifted the weight on his legs. His feet felt normal and completely pain-free. Given that it was a dream, there was no other way for it to be. "Was he right?"

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“Thanks for bringing my race back,” Felygn said. “I appreciate it.”

“You know I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know. But you also did it for them. Many were given an opportunity, but you’re the only one who not only tried, but did it. For that, I’ll give you a final boon.”

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He was back in his bedroom with Euryale sitting on the bed next to him.

“Don’t rush,” she said, gently caressing his cheek. “You can rest a bit longer.”

Dallion smiled, relaxing back down. Yes, he had a bit longer. Yet deep inside, he feared that he’d never see Felygn again, not as a friend in any event.

#### Chapter 948: The Seventh Conqueror

Jeremy and Tiallia looked at each other. It was safe to assume that talking about their past experiences might come with the respective punishment, but discussing general notions had to be alright. After all, Simon had done a lot of the talking and he hadn’t been punished by the Moons.

“Five against a Moon,” Tiallia said. “Have you prophesized the outcome?”

“It gets difficult when dealing with deities. Dallion was only part divine, and he was still able to mess up things. It took a lot of effort to pin him down in one flow of events.” The archbishop’s left eyebrow twitched. “Oh, and I’ll need all your Moonstones.”

“Here we go again.” Jeremy sighed, as even his dragon snorted in disgust.

“Let me correct that,” the archbishop quickly added. “I need to see your Moonstones. I know you’ve been keeping a few for a rainy day. You’ll still get to do that. I just want to see the types you have.”

“You mean he doesn’t even have the full emblem?” Jeremy’s pity turned into anger. “What the hell are we talking about, then? If we had the entire set, we—”

“Would have done nothing,” Simon’s tone suddenly became as hard as diamond. “I gave up my chance. You surrendered the moment the Red Moon asked if you wanted to go through. The rest,” he glanced at Tiallia and Pan, “have already used up their chance. This isn’t like a low-level trial. You only get to use the shortcut once. Dal’s the only one who can turn the key, so show what Moonstones you have.”

Here it was. The first in a chain of moments of truth that would lead to one of them becoming a Moon. Simon had hinted there was a high chance that Dallion would succeed. That wasn’t much of an assurance, but it was, supposedly, better than the alternative.

Tiallia extended her hand, palm up. Three rough purple gems emerged.

The slightest of frowns appeared on Simon’s face. Whatever he was searching for, this wasn’t it.

“Don’t look at me,” Jeremy said, before the question was ever asked. “Dal already cleaned out my piggybank. Whatever I had, he’s got it now.”

“I see...” The regret in Simon’s voice was palpable. Extremely slowly, he reached out into the air, as if to grab something. As he did, a large blue gem materialized. It was as big as a fist, emanating divine power.

“You kept one unconsumed?” Jeremy asked. “Didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Astreza’s Sapphire,” the archbishop said, holding it with such tightness one would think it was a part of him. “The first Moonstone I was given. It was never meant to be used...”

That was an unexpected twist. It seemed that when Simon had said that there were enough for a full set, he had included himself in the calculation. There was no telling how many had passed through his hands: thousands at the very least, possibly a lot more. And all that time, he had still managed to keep the first untouched.

“Here.” He went to Dallion and reluctantly shoved it into his hands. “Now you have enough to complete it.”

“I guess we wait till his condition wears off,” the nymphs said. “Any bright ideas on how to spend the time?”

“Maybe stop your armies fighting,” Dallion couldn’t keep himself from saying.

“That?” the nymph split into a dozen instances, looking at the distant ocean with half of them. “The order was given. Just some people are too enthusiastic for their own good. It’ll be over soon, one way or another.”

Mages, Dallion thought.

It was obvious that anyone with the magic trait would have a huge advantage over anyone else. At the same time, that made them cold. It was ironic that the only other domain ruler at their level—who wasn’t a mage—considered the people of the world of even lesser importance. With the potential exception of those around him, all of them cared for nothing else. Had Pan been the same way, too? More importantly, was Dallion? He had killed thousands, led thousands more to their deaths. He could say that he never forced anyone to do it, but he’d offered a choice that, in most cases, was no choice at all. March, Hannah, Adzorg, Diroh, Vihrogon, Veil, Gloria, Falkner... everyone whose life he had affected had joined him in the battle for the world—a battle they wouldn’t gain anything directly from. Being a hunter, and later a noble, he knew the reality of the world and the necessity of death. Unlike the others, though, he liked to believe that he still gave a damn.

“What if more appear?” Euryale asked, to everyone’s surprise. “What if more than one Moon appears?”

“You think you know more than us?” Tiallia smirked. “We’ve been through this personally. What could a little girl like you tell us that we haven’t seen?”

“You challenged them alone. Now you’re challenging them as a party. What’s stopping them from doing the same?”

The silence was absolute. Dallion had considered the possibility, but since the archbishop had come up with the plan, he was fairly sure that they’d be able to handle it.

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“I may not be a contender, but I’m still a gorgon empress, and the closest thing you got.”

“She does have a point.” Jeremy scratched his chin. “What if all of them appear? A one-on-one challenge is one thing, but when it comes to parties, who knows? It’s not like this has happened before.”

“In living memory,” Pan added.

“In any memory,” Jeremy ridiculed him. “Five against one is great. Five against seven—not so much.”

“Six against seven isn’t great, either,” Tiallia rejoined the discussion. “Even if we pick one to take down, I doubt the other Moons will let us do it before they join in.”



More and more emotions bled out: disapproval, disappointment, anger. Dallion could see everything unravel before his very eyes. So much for Simon's ability to foresee everything. His prophecies were nothing but potential outcomes, which he peeked at thanks to the Moonstones' power. Since that particular resource had been lacking lately, his visions were likely only partially true. It was all up to Dallion to offer a solution that would keep things together, thankfully, he had something in mind.

"We make seven as well," he suggested. "Seven champions against seven Moons."

"You're thinking of adding your fury disciple?" Jeremy laughed as he said it. "Maybe she'll be lucky to reach the level of her father in a few decades. And that's not a given. I've toyed around with furies enough to know that even the promising ones hit a limit around level seventy."

"I don't mean furies." Dallion gritted his teeth. "I'm talking about the other conqueror who challenged the Moons and lost."

"The dryad emperor? He's banished."

"Two of the people here were banished."

It was somewhat curious that no one had suggested the idea before, least of all Simon. Everyone knew that he knew the spell to unbanish people—he had been doing it for millennia. Could it be that there were certain risks involved?

"I'll bring him back to the real world and then we'll have seven," Dallion stressed, confirming that he agreed with Euryale's proposal. "You two might be the strongest, but everyone else is on my side. If you're unwilling to take the risk, I'll try on my own. Go ahead, leave."

Dallion had gone a bit too far, and he knew it. Yet, both of the conquerors chose to stay. While no one voiced it, there was the implied opinion that everyone involved would become a Moon... or at least those that survived. This might mark the greatest change the world had ever known: in a single day, the seven Moons that were could be replaced by new ones.

"Okay, you win this one," Jeremy said. "We'll go on with your plan, but I'll add a condition. If you don't get the dryad in three days, I'll form an alliance with the nymphs and you and everyone else, before we settle things between us."

"As you said, we're the two strongest," Tiallia added with a vicious smile. "And taking you on will be a lot safer than taking on seven Moons."

A blink of an eye later, Dallion and his group were the only ones standing on the mountain peak. Jeremy and his dragon had transformed back into air, and the body of the nymph had transformed into water.

*Water copy*

, Dallion thought. He did wonder that Tiallia had arrived so unprotected compared to the emperor. *How come you didn't catch that, Harp?*

I did, the harpsisword guardian replied. But I didn't think it mattered.

That could be argued, but in the grand scope of things, it had the same result as if she had been there. Real or not, those were the nymph's words, and she had agreed to the plan. Now all that Dallion had to do was deliver.

The first thing Dallion did when he got back to Alliance was go to sleep. Close to five hours remained before he could enter the awakened realms. During that time, he could use a brief respite. He held on to a faint hope that he might have another Moon dream, but that didn't occur. He still had a dream of sorts, but it had a completely different visitor.

Dallion found himself back at the peak of the mountain, only this time he was alone. All seven Moons were visible in the sky, just above the sun setting beneath the horizon.

"Aren't you setting the wrong way?" Dallion wondered. He was lucid enough to suspect that this was a dream, yet was still fascinated how real it felt.

"It's so you can pay attention," a voice said nearby.

Calmly, Dallion turned to his right. A slime was standing there. The form made it impossible to distinguish this specimen from any other member of its species. The bouquet of emotions in his voice, though, was rather unique.

"Pan?" Dallion asked.

"Sorry for visiting like this, but there's something you must know."

Dallion nodded. He wasn't aware that copyettes could enter dreams, though at the same time found it perfectly normal.

"Simon already knows a way out. He was the first to bring anyone out of the banished land. Even during my time, the concept was unthinkable. That's why he's so eager for you to go."

"He'll help me bring back the dryad?" Dallion asked. His surroundings had changed, turning to the archbishop's island. The smell of the ocean filled the air, along with the relaxing sound of crashing waves.

"He didn't gather everyone in order to win. He gathered you in order to lose. Anyone who challenges a Moon and fails is banished along with their entire race. If the entire party fails, everyone will be cast into the banished realm. Only Simon will be able to return, after which he'll bring back only those he wants."

Sneaky was one way to describe the plan. Despite not being able to feel anger or fear in the dream, Dallion acknowledged the machination. As plans went, it was rather smart. If the Moon challenge succeeded, Simon would become a Moon, same as everyone else. If it failed, only he got to repopulate the world with those he saw fit. Even if the challenge didn't take place, there was a fifty-fifty chance that the archbishop would end up victorious. Dallion was the one perceived as a threat

and that was who Jeremy and Tiallia would target. In doing so, they'd become weaker and potentially turn on each other, leaving Simon in a good position to mop things up.

"He's smart," Dallion admitted.

"Not the word I'd use," Pan took a step forward, stopping at one of the massive trees that had surrounded them. "He'll probably offer to help you in the summoning process. Don't trust him."

"I don't need to trust him. I already know how to bring the dryad here."

The dream abruptly ended.

Chapter 949: Banished Realm Awakening

### **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality shifted for the third time, yet Dallion still wasn't convinced. While he didn't show it, being locked out of the realms had been more terrifying than he wanted to let out. In a way, he felt like his awakening powers had been sealed, leaving him helplessly normal. No wonder mages and mid-level awakened feared it so much. Back when he was in the single digits, he didn't find the notion all that terrible. He viewed it as a waste, but not something to lose sleep over. Now that he had almost lost it, he understood the terror that the sealed had gone through... he understood what his mother had been forced to live with for so many years.

"It'll be fine." Giaccia approached in her nymph form. "You won't lose it."

Dallion nodded, but part of him still wasn't sure. Even after achieving so much, the emperor had still found a way to lock his powers for a day. If they went against the Moons, what would they be capable of?

"I must complete the emblem." Dallion summoned the two gems.

They were many times larger in his realm than they were in real life. Both of them were different shades of blue, marking the last two remaining of the set.

"How will you bring him?" The nymph stood a few steps away.

Several tools appeared, along with a vast number of markers surrounding the cyan crystal.

"The same way you were brought back." Dallion started carving. "The same way that I brought Vihrogon back."

Normally, it would take about ten minutes for Dallion to finish shaping the Moonstone. This time, he prolonged it to a full hour. As he worked, he couldn't help but feel a slight sense of loneliness. In the past, at least one of his echos would have been here, making sarcastic comments. At present, all of them were within towns in Dallion's domain in the real world. They were doing a good job from what he knew, organizing things, assisting the town garrisons, and helping out wherever they could. Still, they were no longer part of him.

### **MOON EMBLEM**

**6/7 COMPLETE**

The yellow rectangle emerged. One more remained until the emblem was ready for challenging the Moons. From what both Simon and Pan had explained, the process wasn't instantaneous. Dallion would have to say the words in order for the challenge to take place. Even so, he felt like he was playing with fire.

"About to go, old man?" Onda asked from his tower.

The distance was impressive, but thanks to the level of his perception trait, Dallion could hear him as if they were standing a few steps apart.

"You never reached forging mastery," the nymph said.

"Maybe next time." Dallion started working on the final crystal. "Do you want to return to the real world?" he asked while carving.

"Nah. It's scary out there." The nymph let out a forced laugh. "It's cool here. And now you have a new dragon."

That was hardly the term to describe Aquilequia. The more time passed, the more Dallion was convinced that she had the character of a cat. Thanks to her power, the dragon had the ability to enter and leave his realm as she wished. Being his familiar, she was careful not to cause any major damage, but at the same time Dallion had no means of stopping her from doing as she pleased. The profound patience the creature had in its previous incarnation seemed to have completely vanished. Thinking about it, that was a good thing. Now she had the time to experience growing up from scratch. Nox and Lux had also gone through the same experience in their own way, though it hadn't been anywhere as intense.

The carving became slower and slower. Sadly, for Dallion, it was inevitable it would come to an end, and ultimately it did.

## **MOON EMBLEM**

### **7/7 COMPLETE**

## **MOON AUDIENCE**

**You've earned the right to seek an audience with the Moons. You're free to challenge them for passage through the awakening gate. Doing so will turn you into a pretender.**

**However you use the emblem, you only get to seek an audience once.**

There it was—the final achievement. Unlike the majority of them, it didn't provide any points or gifts, but something far better. Out of everyone Dallion knew, two had used it to challenge the Moons, another had no doubt sought an audience—which explained a lot of the archbishop's unusual abilities. As for Jeremy, Dallion was still uncertain. Simon had suggested that the Tamin Emperor had backed out of the challenge, but that might well be just semantics. After all, the human race hadn't been banished so far.

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Dallion held the emblem between his fingers. He couldn't deny it was beautiful, resembling the Order's emblem—one blue gem surrounded by six others.

“Seven Moons,” Dallion said, then summoned a chain of Moon platinum.

“You’ll manage.” Giaccia went up to him. “I’m certain.”

“Me and your sister fighting for the same goal.” Dallion attached the emblem to the chain, then put it round his neck. “Didn’t think that would ever happen.”

“Let’s hope that both of you get to achieve your dream.”

Hopefully, none of the dreams would clash. Summoning his instruments away, Dallion returned to the real world. It was past noon, Euryale was gone, doing her best to keep morale high. It had been decided that the details of the arrangement wouldn’t be openly discussed. As far as everyone was aware, they had entered a period of calm during which discussions were taking place. There was one thing, though, that was impossible to hide.

“Could have been better,” Simon said, sitting on a marble chair in Dallion’s room.

While Dallion’s wife and all of his top commanders were off making sure that everything within his domain was stable, the archbishop did absolutely nothing. It hardly came as a surprise since he’d done the same on his island for thousands of years, but Dallion still found it annoying. Back on Earth, he’d never have picked him for a roommate, that was for certain.

“Things could always be better,” Dallion said.

“I meant the emblem.” The boy pointed. “You’ve done the bare minimum.”

“It works,” Dallion ended the conversation there.

*Dal*

, Gloria said from within his domain. *Your mother doesn’t want you to go through with this.*

That wasn’t what Dallion wanted to hear right now.

Why did you tell my mother? He asked.

*Someone had to. I didn’t go into most of the specifics, but... She’s your mother, Dal.*

*And she will be after I get through this.*

*It’s like she said when you left the village. It’ll never be enough for you.*

She really had said so. Looking back, Dallion thought he’d be content with living in Nerosal. His goal was to enter an awakened guild—which he had—and possibly rise to the position of guild lieutenant, or maybe even guild captain. Remembering there was a time he viewed Vend and March as undefeatable made him smile.

There’s nowhere to go after this, he said. When I become a Moon, it’ll end.

*Is that what you want me to tell her?*

*No. I’ll tell her myself once it’s over.*

Using his domain ruler powers, Dallion transported himself out of the bedroom and into his forge. To his great annoyance, Simon had done the shift with him. The boy was also a domain ruler.

“I hope you didn’t waste any Moonstones for this.” Dallion summoned half a dozen ingots towards him. Each of them was a special metal.

“Why would I? You’re so obvious.” Simon looked about. He had let just enough of his emotions leak out to let Dallion know that he didn’t find the building particularly appealing. “I can tell you how to summon someone directly,” he said.

Dallion ignored him. If it were that easy, the archbishop would have done it already. Instead, Dallion was going to do his thing.

The item he was creating didn’t matter, but even so, Dallion wanted it to be special. Given the circumstances, a metal version of the twi-crown seemed appropriate.

Magic, forging, arts, and scholar skills combined into one, as Dallion simultaneously created two parts of one object. Each of the bands were made of a different metal, yet at the same time they were also one whole: “separate but united,” as Onda would say.

“You can always use a Moonstone,” Simon said, leaning back against the wall. “I’ve a few left so I can share it.”

“No, thanks.” Dallion kept on forging.

“It won’t matter. I won’t need them in a couple of hours. Why waste it? You’ll get to make your first world item and earn another achievement.”

The temptation was present, but the way the offer was made rubbed Dallion the wrong way. Onda had never told him how to create a world item and neither did any scroll in the Grand Citadel’s library, for that matter. Using a Moonstone would easily deal with that, providing all the knowledge that Dallion needed. It was a valid option, and any trait boost would be more than welcome right now.

You piece of crap, Dallion thought, determination filling him to his core. I’ll do it myself!

The blueprint in his mind exploded. Dallion could see the theoretical form of the item grown from an item to a building, then to an entire area. That was his current limit—a large sphere item that was as large as his personal realm. It was far bigger than any sphere item he had been in; possibly Adzorg would call it a semi-world item, or some other mage-made-up term. Sadly, it still wasn’t enough.

“Forging a province is never easy, isn’t that right, Kraisten?” Dallion asked as he entered the blueprint of the domain he was making. In a single moment, he imagined himself in there, not just as a forger, but also as part of it. With enough concentration, he could feel the ground of the realm, feel the wind in it, sense the smells, sounds, and tastes... In that particular moment, Dallion imagined himself living in the domain.

## **WORLD ITEM CREATED - TWI-CROWN**

Now! Dallion unleashed the magic threads within him, before the rectangle had fully formed. His plan was to find the dryad emperor and pull him out through the item, as he had done with Vihrogon. Yet, something completely different occurred.

## **BANISHED REALM AWAKENING**

A second rectangle emerged. Similar to the ones relating to the Moon emblem, it was yellow.

Before Dallion could even think of saying anything, the opening of an aether vortex emerged in front of him. Next thing he knew, Dallion was standing on both sides of it.

“What the heck?!” Dallion turned around.

Only the him within the vortex moved. The part back at the forge remained frozen as everything else in the real world.

“Would you look at that?” a deep voice thundered. “We have a celebrity here.”

Dallion looked around. Sky, ground, and light were concepts that didn’t exist, yet at the same time, they were there. As Gleam had told him once, there was everything and nothing at the same time. Dallion could feel the heavy pressure of countless souls in a realm that was simultaneously endless and crowded.

“So, you really did it? You punctured the barrier,” another voice said, just as loud and deep as the last. Dallion couldn’t see its owner, yet his music skills let him acquire a mental image of the entity.

“A colossus?” he asked.

“With the younger races getting a free ride, there’s mostly us left,” the second colossus laughed. “Or have you come to take us out as well?”

Dallion didn’t reply.

“Come on, you can speak your mind,” another voice said. “Not that anyone cares. What’s the worst that can happen? We can only keep you for company.”

Laughter erupted like a thunderstorm mixed with an earthquake.

“I’m here to find someone.” Dallion managed to maintain enough presence of mind. Unlike all other realms, this one seemed to pull his own thoughts in multiple directions, as if wanting to spread them everywhere. “He’s a pretender.”

“There are lots of pretenders,” a new voice boomed. “What makes the one you seek special?”

That was a question Dallion wasn’t prepared for.

Chapter 950: The Alliance of Seven

“How many pretenders are there?” Dallion asked.

Laughter filled the realm.

“Why are you here, Dallion?” one of the voices boomed.

“I told you. I’m searching for a dryad.”

In his mind, the outlines of colossi began to form. Clearly, eyes were both useful and useless in this realm—he could see as far as the horizon, yet at the same time, he saw only emptiness. It was the voices themselves that gave him a sensation of the entities, and they were massive. As large as the beings during his awakening trials, they rose up into the sky greater than mountains. Dallion could imagine a world in which they ruled supreme—a world in which the landscape itself shifted as they moved. Had such a time existed? One claimed that it had.

“You’re searching for something you don’t know,” a new voice said. “Why are you intent on finding him?”

Dallion went through the answers in his head. If he lied, there was a good chance that they’d know. If there really were pretenders here right now, they’d see through any music or magic attempts. On the other hand, if he told them the real reason, they might ask to be brought back into the real world as well.

Damn you, Simon, Dallion thought. You claimed that you wanted to protect the world, yet you risked this each time you brought back one of your copyettes.

There had to be more to it. Dallion had brought two beings back from the banished realm, yet in both cases there had been a direct link between him and them. One could say he had an anchor point to focus on. Now, he had to find his target.

“I’m bringing him back to the real world,” he said after a long pause.

“That’s clear,” one of the voices boomed. “But why?”

“I intend on challenging the Moons.”

The voices and laughter instantly ceased. That mere fact told Dallion that, despite knowing a lot, the beings somehow were unable to see that part of Dallion’s life. Maybe they weren’t interested as much as he thought they’d be, or there was something preventing them from seeing anything regarding the Moons.

“You’re really going on with it?” a female voice echoed. It seemed that Dallion had been wrong on both accounts.

“Yes,” he replied.

“You know what will happen if you fail.”

Dallion nodded.

“And you have no idea what will happen if you succeed.”

“It has to be worth at least that much. Or maybe you can tell me?”



“We can tell you nothing,” one of the mail voices boomed. “And even if we do, you have no way of knowing whether to believe it.”

That much was correct, especially here. They could claim anything, and it would still seem both plausible and doubtful.

“Do you really want to see him?” the female voice asked again.

“It’s why I’m here.” Although I didn’t plan to be.

“Then I’ll take him to you. Consider it a thanks for honoring my daughter.”

“Your daughter?” Dallion asked, surprised.

“The ring guardian you first faced. You knew nothing of this world or the ways of awakened, yet you still offered a fair fight.”

It had been ages since Dallion had thought of that. It was the first trial he had been given back when Aspion Luor was still village chief. “A simple request,” as the man had put it, it had made him face the guardian of Gloria’s ring. Dallion had been in many more difficult fights since, but to this day, he thought of that fight as one of his most notable victories.

“Thank you,” he said.

The realm shifted around Dallion. Looking at it, everything remained identical as it was, yet he could feel the voices moving by, though without moving. The closest thing he could imagine was hovering above a globe while it turned beneath him, bringing him to an entirely new place. During the “trip” he felt many other presences—copyettes, feral creatures, dryads that hadn’t been fortunate to enter the world swords. To his surprise, there also were a few nymphs. It seemed that the mass summoning spell cast by the Azures hadn’t fully worked, after all.

“You’re strong,” the female voice said. “And you’ll get stronger, but that still doesn’t mean you’ll win.”

“That’s why I need the dryad pretender.”

“He’s not as strong as you’ll become. But that is your life. Here, we only get to watch.”

“To watch?”

Dallion felt a strong presence appear in front of him. It was unmistakably dryad and a lot more powerful than the surrounding ones. It was comparable to the initial presences, though different.

“You’ve come, have you?” an elegant voice asked. Dallion paused a moment, only to realize that all other presences were no longer there, including the colossus that had “brought” him here. “I didn’t think you’d go through with it.”

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“I’ve been getting that a lot.”

“It’s nothing personal.” A form started to materialize; not just an imaginary creation based on voice alone, but an actual physical form. “Everything’s a matter of probability. The banished are destined to watch everything. You’ve noticed that time here is frozen, but it’s also not. Everyone has eternity to look at every moment of the real world as long as they put some effort into it. There are those who deliberately avoid it.”

An eternity to watch? If every person was a different channel, that explained why guardians often chose their owners. Onda had almost said as much. Strange why Dallion hadn’t experienced the same in Harp’s memories.

“You know everything that happened in the real world?” Dallion asked.

“Nice try.” The dryad’s form had almost fully formed. It had the general outlines of any dryad, possibly slightly taller with long flowy hair. It also wore a crown—one far more majestic than the one Dallion had created. “If it were so simple, Simon would have never lost. Only he could have thought of such a plan. Seven hopefuls past and present against the seven Moons. Tell me, do you think you’ll succeed?”

Despite not wanting to admit it, a large part of the plan depended on Simon’s prophecies. Dallion had never faced a Moon in battle, the dryad had.

“What do you think?”

The full form of the dryad had finally emerged. He was very different from Vihrogon. The former ruler’s features were sharp, beautiful, yet merciless. A fraction thinner than the ideal, he was already wearing a full suit of wooden armor—birch, as far as Dallion could tell. Both hard and flexible, it had more magic threads within it than a mage’s robe. The armor covered the dryad from toe to neck, covered with only a cape of vine threads.

That was one way to use one’s natural magic to the fullest, but it was more than that. Dallion could tell that it took a high magic trait to make full use of the attire. Anyone with a hundred or less would only be making a fashion statement.

“There’s no doubt that you’ll lose,” the dryad said calmly. “I’ll still join you, though.”

“If you’re so certain that we’ll lose, why agree to it?”

“Because it’ll still give me a few hours in the real world.” There was no smile on the dryad’s face, although the emotion emanating from him had traces of joy and melancholy. “I’ve no intention of becoming an item guardian, but this would do.”

He reached out and placed his hand on Dallion’s shoulder.

**LYULAK has been summoned back into the world**

**ALLIANCE OF SEVEN**

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

**All your preparations are complete. See you soon.**

The next thing he knew, Dallion was back in his forge. The twi-crown he had worked to create was cracked in the middle, rendering it completely unusable. However, at this point, it didn't matter—a new person has emerged.

"Hello, Lyulak," Simon said, not in the least impressed or even surprised by the outcome. "I knew you'd accept."

"Simon." The dryad looked at him. "I never thought I'd see your expensive habit come to an end."

"You say that, but you still accepted my help at the time." The archduke stretched. "Did you two have a chance to chat?"

Neither Dallion nor the dryad emperor were willing to answer. Nothing in the conversation had been remotely significant; it was just that neither of them particularly liked Simon, despite following his plan.

"I told him how to create world items," Simon continued, ignoring their reaction. "I also suggested using them as a safeguard."

That made two races that the archbishop had "helped." He hadn't stopped them from losing the war. It was very possible that he had been the cause of the races' banishment. Could that have been the reason he'd told them about the way to challenge the Moons? If so, why had he given them a way out? He had personally unbanished individual copyettes, provided the means for the nymphs to unbanish themselves, and told the dryads how to prevent part of their population from suffering a similar fate. Was this all part of a grand plan? Unlikely. Despite the appearance Simon did his best to make, Dallion strongly suspected that he never had a firm plan, but was merely reacting to unfolding events. His ability to see into the future allowed him to react to these events before they happened, but he was never the one to initiate things.

"And what about now? Any more safeguards you'd share?" The dryad went up to the archbishop.

The contrast between the two was tremendous. A head and half taller, the dryad looked down at the boy like a mighty warrior, not even finding it worth to sully his blade with the blood of someone so low. The archbishop, on his part, looked up with the full knowledge that he'll remain safe no matter what.

"No safeguards this time," Simon replied. "I take it you want a few hours to enjoy the view before we start?"

The dryad clenched his fists.

"A few hours is fine, but don't take much longer," the archbishop continued. "It'll only become more difficult further on."

“Just get them here. I don’t need your pity.”

“You okay with that, Dal?” Simon turned to Dallion.

Dallion considered it. The meeting place didn’t matter much for the meeting. For what followed, though, it was better to be as far away as possible.

“Tell them to meet us at the peak.”

“Done.” Simon didn’t delay. “I suggest we set out quickly. We’ll take longer than them.”

There was merit in the suggestion, though not for the reasons Simon thought. Unlike all the times Dallion had set out to an important battle, this time he didn’t want to say goodbye to anyone. Maybe this was his way of telling himself that he would be coming back, or maybe this way he wouldn’t have to worry what might happen to the people he had grown so fond of. One way or another, the whole world was going to change after this.

Using his domain ruler powers, Dallion brought Eury and Pan to the forge. Five of the seven ultimate powers in the world looked at each other silently, aware of things to come. One final step separated them from the greatest battle the world had ever seen. Words were useless at this point.

I just want to say that it was a pleasure and honor watching you grow, dear boy, Adzorg wasn’t able to keep himself from saying. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll keep an eye on things until you’re back.

*Make sure that Di gets to a level at which she could replace me.*

*A loss in the mind is half a loss on the field, dear boy. I’d have thought you’d have remembered that after all this time.*

Mentally, Dallion laughed. Leave it to the old mage to have the last word. All things said, though, if the alliance of seven failed, there’d be only one remaining race in the world.

The ceiling and walls of the room tore off, opening a view to the sky. Four of the five people present cast flight spells on themselves. Euryale, the only exception, called upon Dark, who flew down and became her wings.

“Let’s go,” Dallion said and darted to the west. The rest of the group followed.