

Leveling up 971

Chapter 971: Architect's Bonus

Maybe it was because his awakened abilities had improved, but Dallion could feel the emotions emanating in the room as if he had restored his music skills. The deputy marshal's wife was emitting killing intent, ready to jump into action at the slightest provocation. Her son had lost any and all rebellious streams, feeling completely out of place and almost afraid of what might follow. As for Atol, the only thing that prevented her from outright running away was the knowledge that it wouldn't do any good. And still, she was also pleased to finally meet other people from the awakened world.

"He isn't from there, is he?" Dallion asked, looking at the teen.

"No. He shouldn't have even been awakened, but apparently architects are considered special..." The woman glared at her son. "That's why we don't flaunt our powers."

The deputy entered the room.

"I put Matt up in the guest room. Chances are he won't remember much, but I appreciate some help in that area." He turned to Atol. "My music skills aren't as good as they were."

"Of course." Atol stiffened.

Even here on Earth, she still wasn't sure how to address him, or Dallion, for that matter. Architects were the story of legends. Their existence was only known to a few high-positioned members of the Order of the Seven Moons. Atol had only learned about them due to the importance of her family. Back then, it was stressed that she wasn't to mention it ever again. At the time, she'd even considered it a made-up story to increase the importance of the human race. Now, she wasn't sure what to think.

"So, how's the old place?" The deputy grabbed a bottle of beer and sat opposite Dallion. "A bit calmer, I hope?"

"I can't tell," Dallion replied. "A lot was destroyed in the conquest wars. Then we challenged the Moons..."

"Challenged the Moons?" the marshal burst out laughing. "You're crazy, you know that? No one challenges the Moons."

It was obvious why.

"We lost, but I was the last one standing."

"That's usually how it happens. What's the world's level now?"

"Four." Dallion paused. "There haven't been other architects after you. Other than me." And he didn't consider himself a full architect. In a one to one, there

was every chance that the marshal would have kicked his ass. “Why are you hiding?”

“You saw what happens when we go public. There are thousands of awakened in the world right now. Dozens, maybe even hundreds, that have a skill or two that they remember.”

“You didn’t try to take over this world...”

“Old habits die hard. I don’t want to risk getting on Astreza’s radar. That’s not the issue.” The man took another gulp of his beer. “There are two main principles when it comes to awakened. One—they’re attracted to one another. Two, they fight when they meet one another.”

“That’s not—”

“True? You used combat splitting the moment you set eyes on my son. Your friend there has been using music skills non-stop. In a few futures, she resorted to crippling commands. The only reason she didn’t use them on you is because she can’t. Isn’t that right?”

That was a very cynical view, even for Dallion. There was no denying that many awakened strived to become King of the Hill, but there were even more than didn’t. Maybe things weren’t as great in the previous age as everyone claimed. The days of the eternal city were said to be peaceful and prosperous, but no one ever hinted as to what the world was prior to that. It was easy to talk after the world had been leveled up and all the scars of the past had been brushed away in another realm.

“Times change.” Dallion looked the previous architect in the eyes.

For several seconds, the man looked back, not budging a muscle. A total silence filled the room as everyone was wondering whether they’d resort to fighting or not.

“Maybe.” The deputy shrugged at last. “Either way, we don’t want to be part of that world again. Things are much better as they are.”

“You’ll have to teach your son how to remain hidden,” Dallion pressed on.

“Not anymore. You did that for me.” The man smirked. “Now that he’s seen what monsters there are in the world, he’ll make sure to keep his skills in check.”

Was that also part of the deputy’s plan? As someone capable of prophetic visions, it wasn’t beyond him to set up events for it to happen. He was just as manipulative as Simon and Jeremy.

“Did you ever think of going back?” Dallion asked.

“No.” The answer was swift.

“Even after changing the world?”

“An architect should never see what he’s created. If I was back there, I’d probably complain about the details and stop people from doing what I thought was wrong.” He finished his beer and tossed the bottle into the only bin in the room. “I have everything I want here.”

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“I see...” So much for that.

“His wife stayed behind,” Atol said. “That’s why he wants to go back.”

At the comment, the atmosphere suddenly changed. The fear and anger seemed to melt away, replaced by understanding. Every high-level awakened was familiar with loss: it was an obligatory part of achieving nobility.

“Kul, go to your room for a bit.” His mother said.

“But—” the boy began.

A single gesture from his father made it clear that it wasn’t a request. With overemphasized grumbling, the boy stood up and left the room. Half a minute later, the deputy went and closed the door.

“How did it happen?”

“No one told me that the Architects didn’t get to stay. I had already asked that my wife remain in the world, then...”

“Fucking Moons,” the woman hissed through gritted teeth. Clearly, her experience with them wasn’t particularly good, either. “Is that why you came here?”

Dallion nodded.

“You and Atol were the only awakened I found. The only ones that remember. I thought you might know a bit more than me.”

“I doubt it. As I said, I made sure to stay out of things. You’re not the first to have come here. She—” he nodded in Atol’s direction “—wasn’t the first, either. I made sure that they found nothing. You’re different, though. There are too many Moon strands in you to allow for an adequate prediction. I can see some elements, but not others. Just like a wildcard.”

A clairvoyant wildcard, Dallion thought. That was something that Adzorg would have enjoyed theorizing about.

“So, there are others,” he said.

“Of course there are. I just have no idea who or where they are.”

“Why?” Atol asked, unable to comprehend. “You said that you could see them. Why not track them down?”

“Because I didn’t want to. Didn’t want to get to know them, didn’t want to interfere, didn’t want to get involved one way or another. At best, we’d never see each other again. At worst, we’d try to kill each other. I didn’t think someone like you’d show up.”

The answer wasn’t what Dallion had hoped for. Suspecting several awakened, he had been so eager to get here in the hopes he’d learn everything that he was missing. It would have been too easy to find an answer right away, but at least he had hoped he’d get something. In different circumstances, maybe he would have enjoyed discussing what the awakened world was like and all the changes since the previous architect’s banishment. Right now, he felt as if he’d reached a door only to have it slam in his face.

“Sorry,” the deputy said.

“Is there even a way back?”

“Sure there is. The Moons took us there once. They can do it again. As for doing it on your own... who knows? You’re an architect, so that might make things possible. It’s not something I’d want to do.”

Of course you wouldn’t, Dallion thought. Jimmy had everything he wanted right here. He had managed to get the love of his life returned to the real world with her memories intact. From there, it must have been easy for the two of them to find each other and start a family. The two of them had led a normal life with no battles, no plotting, and no abuse of their powers. By the looks of it, the greatest challenge had been keeping their son from exposing his powers—which now they had managed thanks to Dallion.

“I’ll need your car,” Dallion stood up. “We’ll leave the keys at the marshal’s office.”

“I’ll come with you. We need to get the old guy back there.”

Dallion nodded.

“There’s one thing I can tell you, though. With or without memories, awakened usually retain a few of their skills. We’re different. As an architect, you have the potential of unlocking most of them. All you need to do is to find how to trigger a memory that would let them leak into this world.”

“Will that help me to go back?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Skills work differently here. Either way, they’ll help you find people faster. Hopefully, that’s worth something.”

It wasn't, but Dallion didn't want to ruin the mood even more. Leaving Atol and Jimmy to deal with the marshal, he left the house.

Not a word was said the entire trip back to the city. As far as Matt was concerned, they had gone to the wrong house. Both the mother and the teen had ironclad alibis for the incident earlier that day, as well as the suspicious behavior of the boy.

Atol explained it away thanks to her music skills, suggesting that she had found a link leading to Los Angeles, where they would be heading next. The story sounded just plausible enough to be believed, and that was it. By nightfall, the entire event—along with Dallion and Atol's visit to that part of the country—was completely forgotten.

"Will you be going back to teaching?" Dallion finally broke the silence as they neared the airport.

"Until something better comes up." It was obvious that she didn't appreciate Dallion's chances, even if for some reason she remained determined to help him.

"Can you get the car there?" he asked. "This car."

"Won't be a problem. I'll check the model and—"

"This car," Dallion repeated with a note of power in his voice.

"Sure. Will be a bit more difficult, but I'll get it there. It might take a few weeks, though. A lot of people will need convincing."

"A few weeks is fine."

There were no two ways about it—the trip had been a bust, yet at the same time it had opened Dallion's eyes to a few truths. There were other awakened out there. To find them, though, he had to become stronger, which he intended to do. Just as otherworlders had no limiting restrictions in the awakened world, as an architect, he held the same bonus here as well. It was all a matter of training.

"Do you remember the awakening trials?" he asked all of a sudden.

Atol glanced at him, then focused on the road.

"A bit," she replied, uncertain what he expected to hear.

"There's always a way to complete them. The only way to fail was to give up."

"So, finding the way back is another trial?"

"It's a barrier. Giving up would mean my love for Eury wasn't strong enough to begin with."

"Hate to break it to you, but that's only true in songs," the woman said instinctively. "Though, who knows?" She quickly corrected herself. "We shouldn't remember anything of that world, either."

“If my love wasn’t strong enough, I couldn’t have made it all the way to the final gate. And if I can pass a gate without defeating my inner flaws, I can go through them back again.”

“I never was into that philosophical bullshit. But hey, as long as there’s a chance...”

“There’s always a chance. The secret is to prepare enough to make it a certainty.”

Chapter 972: Invisible Lighting

One of the things that separated Earth from the awakened world was that the mundane had the scary ability to fade any experience faster than a limiting echo.

The first few days, Dallion’s thoughts were still focused on his predecessor. Seeing the pinnacle of an awakened showed him what Simon could have been had he kept his nerve; it had shown him what Dallion had accidentally become, despite not being adequately prepared. “Jimmy” was someone who had fought his way to the top, then deliberately chosen to lead a normal life. He had developed a few of his abilities, though never abused them.

After a week, Dallion’s focus shifted to finding the means to find other awakened who could potentially help them. Atol had decided to keep her TA role, leaving Dallion to do what he wanted. Gradually a routine formed composed of studying, hanging out with his friends, as well as trying to develop additional skills.

The process was a lot more difficult than he initially imagined. Apparently, while earning damage was an obligatory part of restoring a skill, it didn’t guarantee it. It had taken Dallion ten days of fighting his phone until he finally restored his attack skill. Thankfully, the phone was very understanding, often ending the fight at Dallion’s request. In turn, Dallion made use of his mending ability to partially fix the phone’s issues, even if the screen stubbornly remained cracked despite his efforts.

“Dude, how did I get a B on that?” Dallion’s roommate whined. Compared to the majority of the cohort, that was a rather good result. Yet, that didn’t change the fact that everyone in the friend group had As.

“You’ll get the next one.” Dallion hardly paid attention. He had his own problems to deal with, namely getting all four common skills restored.

“Easy for you to say. You’ve got photographic memory.”

“I don’t,” Dallion lied. “I spent as much time studying as you.”

“Yeah, right.” The roommate tossed his test score on the floor. “By the way, you should talk to Jen more.”

“Huh? I talk to her every day.” Dallion looked up from his laptop screen.

“I mean talk, talk, dude! You’re talking with us. I mean, you should talk to her alone. Girl’s been miserable ever since you went on your mysterious trip.”

It was just as Dallion feared. He had tried to break it off, even asked Atol to convince the girl to see him just as a friend, yet it was always a temporary solution.

“I’ll talk to her,” he said, meaning it.

How the heck do I tell her I’m married? He wondered. That was even worse than saying he was several thousand years old. For one thing, no one would believe him. For another—it wouldn’t matter in the least. The only way to deal with emotions was to use other emotions, for which he needed magic or music skills.

“I think I’ll go out for a bit.” Dallion closed his laptop and left it on the bed.

“Good on you, dude!” His roommate gave him the heads up. “Call if you need a wingman.”

“No way.” Dallion let out a snort and left his dorm.

The outside was full of people. With the first series of exams over, everyone was doing what they did best—namely, not study. People were sitting on every large patch of grass, walking about aimlessly, or discussing things in the parking lot.

After some consideration, Dallion decided to go to his new car. Atol had parked her right next to the muscle car, almost making for a comical situation. If guardians had the ability to talk to one another, like in the awakened world, there’s probably talking non-stop. Given their nature, Dallion wouldn’t be surprised if alarms started going off at random times of the day and night.

Hey, girl, Dallion said, tapping her gently on the hood. How are you?

Bored, the car replied. I like you, sweetie, but you barely drive me. Remaining in the same spot isn’t what I was made for.

I get that. Don’t worry. Once I get a few things sorted, there will be lots of driving.

Good to hear, sweetie, the car said in a warm tone. I know it will be worth the journey.

Dallion looked up at the sky. There were several hours until evening, but he could still see the white crescent of the moon above. He couldn’t be certain whether that was Astreza or not, but either way, all his prayers, awake or in dreams, had been ignored. As far as the Moons were concerned, he was just an ordinary person.

“Many would say that talking to your car is a sign of overcompensation,” Atol’s voice sounded a short distance away. “In your case, you probably get to lead a meaningful conversation.”

“Tough day?” Dallion gave her a quick glance.

“I really don’t know how anyone can survive without music skills. If I actually had to listen to all the crap people wanted to say, I’d fucking—” she stopped, leaving the sentence unfinished. “How’s the skill recovering going?”

“Slow,” Dallion said. “Still missing athletics.”

“Fuck you,” the woman said, her voice streaming with envy. “A damned architect. I had to go through hell to get one single skill. No splitting, no talking, no entering realms. You got all that in less than a month and it’s still not enough.”

From an outside point of view, she was right. Compared to everyone else on Earth, Dallion had achieved a lot in a remarkably short period of time. Even in the Awakened world, it had taken him way longer to learn what he had re-learned so far.

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“How exactly did you get your skill back?” he asked.

“I told you. Keep on humming and—”

“I’ve been humming, singing, whistling and all that for weeks.”

“Well, you’re just fucking slow,” Atol said in a measured tone. “It’ll either come to you, or it won’t.”

Earring, Dallion said, addressing the woman’s piece of jewelry. How did she learn to sing?

Hmm, sing you say? The earring replied in the voice of an old woman. If Dallion had to guess, it had to be over a century old—probably a piece of family jewelry the woman had been given by a grandparent. She’s always been able to sing.

But not as good as she suddenly got.

Well, yes. She did improve a lot at one point. That’s when she became special.

“Hey!” Atol said, seeing what Dallion was looking at. “Tell me you’re not talking to some item I wear.”

Dallion looked her in the eyes without saying anything.

“Shit. You have problems, you know that?”

“Items on Earth aren’t as loyal as those in the other world,” Dallion said calmly. “Since there’s no one talking to them, they have no problem sharing everything they know. So, I’ll ask you again. How did you get your skill?”

“You really are a shithead,” Atol said beneath her breath. “Now I know what it takes to become an architect.” She turned around, as if looking at the horizon. After several seconds, she turned back again. “Lightning. I really was hit by lightning. It hurt like hell, but when I woke up, I had it.”

“You’re saying I need to zap myself?”

“No.” The woman shook her head. “I tried. I tried getting hit by a second lightning, I tried all sorts of shit and the only thing that did was almost get me in a straightjacket. Good thing I had music by then.”

Internally, Dallion trembled. Regardless of what he thought of Atol, he couldn't accuse her of not being determined. Then again, Adzorg would probably have called her desperate.

“And now I learned that I have restrictions placed,” she added.

“You can do a lot with your voice.”

“Not as much as you.”

It all went back to pain and shock, apparently. Dallion had no intention of subjecting himself to anything as extreme. Still, he refused to give up.

“Once I figure it out, I'll help you get another skill,” he said.

“There's no way to know whether it's possible.”

“It is. Magic is the big exception.”

Atol laughed.

“Humble as ever. Fucking hell. So, what do we do until then? I got as many people as possible looking for weird things happening. Nothing serious so far. If they're there, they're hiding really well.”

“We'll get to that. Right now—” Dallion moved away from the car “—I need you to find me a fancy lighter.”

“Will I regret asking why?”

“You said lightning was the trigger. It takes a lighter to see the principle. Once I figure that out, it'll be easier.”

The notion was a bit of a stretch, but at least it gave Dallion something to focus on. While he was never going to admit it publicly, he was also running out of options. He still had one potential lead he could follow, but he didn't feel ready for it. Not until he had upped a few more skills.

Combat splitting, Dallion jumped into the air with one of his instances, making a perfect somersault, before landing ten feet away. None of that became reality, but at least it proved that he could handle his acrobatic skills in the real world as well.

The rest of the day was spent searching for Jenna. Normally, she spent most of her time in the library or one of the nearby coffee shops. After not finding her in either of the places, Dallion repaired his phone again and tried calling her. This time, the only thing he got was that the number he was trying to reach wasn't available.

“Are you enjoying this?” Dallion asked, looking at the moon in the sky. “Or maybe you just don't—”

A bolt of lightning emerged from nowhere and hit Dallion right in the forehead. Time froze, then reality quickly unraveled, crumbling as if blown by the wind.

For a fraction of a second Dallion was able to see what was beneath it—not matter or space, but an infinite number of magic threads glowing in bright blue. Like clusters of cables, they continued along straight lines, merging into node clusters.

“Electric wires,” Dallion said. “Magic really is electricity.”

“Is that what it’s like in your world?” a familiar voice asked.

As expected, Eury had appeared in the distorted reality—the only thing real other than Dallion. This time, she was surrounded by a golden shimmer.

That’s not supposed to happen, Dallion thought. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Maybe I’m asleep, same as you. That’s how it works.”

But I’m not asleep. “How are you? How are you really?”

“Away from you.” The gorgon walked closer. Thankfully, she didn’t seem aged since the last time Dallion saw her. “Other than that, things are calm. No chainlings, no voidlings... even all the cracks have gone.”

“So, it’s fine, then?”

“I’m the only one who remembers what happened.” Loneliness resonated in her voice. “Everyone else just is, but they don’t remember anything. Veil, Gloria, Di... even your family. I went to see them.”

Upon hearing that, Dallion felt as if someone had grabbed him by the throat.

“They’re all fine. Your brother is turning into quite the adventurer.”

“But no one remembers me.”

Eury nodded.

“There are stories about the architect that saved the world, but you don’t seem to have ever existed.”

“What about you?”

“Oh, I’m revered. No one can remember a thing I’ve done in the past, but everyone knows me as the Architect’s wife—the one that was left behind.”

“I didn’t want to,” Dallion quickly said. “I’ll find a way to get back. We’ll be together again.”

The snakes on the gorgon’s head moved about.

“Have I ever let you down?”

Instead of an answer, Euryale placed her hand on his shoulder. A sharp pain went through Dallion’s body, as if something had pierced him. Next thing he knew, he was on a rather uncomfortable bed in a small room smelling of medical supplies.

“Oh, you’re up,” a nurse said. “I guess you kept your word.”

“Huh?” Dallion winced. The lights were too bright and his shoulder was killing him.

“You promised you wouldn’t visit till after your first exam,” the nurse approached. “And here you are.”

“What happened?”

“You fainted on campus. A few people brought you straight here. I did a basic blood test while you were out. Results came in an hour ago. Everything seems fine.”

“I fainted?” Dallion still wasn’t sure what had happened.

“Well, there’s that. I’d say the best thing is for you to go to a hospital for a proper check-up. I’ll call your parents, but first, let me check your—”

“I’m fine,” Dallion said. This time there was a bouquet of emotions added to his words. For the first time since he’d returned to Earth, Dallion was able to use his music skills.

Chapter 973: Alone no More

How did I end up here? Dallion kept asking himself as he lay in the medical center’s bed. He had used his newly rediscovered music skills to ensure that he was the only patient in the room and also that no one would make any further reports on the matter.

From what the nurse had told him, he had fainted all of a sudden and been dragged there by a few students on campus. Dallion had made sure that the initial incident was heavily modified to indicate he had gotten sun stroke. It was a sloppy excuse, but good enough to keep people from looking in further. Of course, that hadn’t kept his mother from calling every hour to check on him.

It had taken three long talks on the phone for him to convince her everything was okay. Only the last time did he force himself into using music skills. Hopefully, he’d never have to do that again.

For hours, Dallion went through all the events he remembered occurring before ending up in the med center. He could swear that there had been lightning, and at the same time, he was certain that there wasn’t. There was no mark on his clothes or even his arm, despite the constant pain. As far as the nurse and the center’s doctors were concerned, there was no cause for that. In their view, it was a result of cramping or the rough fashion in which he had been carried. It was too much of a coincidence, especially since he had acquired his music skills as a result.

Maybe there never was lightning to begin with? Atol could have experienced the same and come to the wrong conclusion.

The door to the room opened and the familiar nurse peeked in.

“At least try to get some sleep,” she said in a disapproving fashion.

“I had a long nap,” Dallion lied, using his music skills. “I’ll try to sleep some more during the night.”

“You better. I won’t be letting you out if you’re not fully recovered.”

Dallion smiled politely and nodded. As far as he was concerned, he was all right even now. If he hadn’t wanted some time alone, he would have already been out and about.

Waiting till the door closed again, Dallion took his phone and tried calling Jenna. The result was the same. To make matters worse, the cracks on the screen had grown.

“Sorry about this, buddy,” Dallion said, sliding his finger along the cracked screen.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

Reality shifted, bringing him into the realm of the phone. He had come here so often that he practically knew it by heart.

“Dal,” the robot-like form of the guardian emerged, “Up for another sparring match?”

“Yeah.” Seems mending and improvement are the only things keeping you together, he thought. “Do full out this time.”

“Are you sure? You didn’t do too well the last few times.”

There was no denying that fighting without magic or a weapon made things a lot more challenging. Then again, Dallion had music skills now. As long as he could time it right, victory was ensured.

Cracking his fingers, Dallion took a step forward. The moment he did, the ground cracked beneath him.

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 71%

Seriously?!

He looked down. This was the first time he’d affected a realm in such fashion by accident. He’d need some magic to repair all that. Maybe if he could see the magic threads, it was possible to—

The crack grew twice in size.

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 70%

This time, Dallion paused. There was no way he had done this. Something else had to be in play.

“Nox?” he asked, waiting for confirmation.

There was no way the crackling was here. For that matter, he had yet to see a single crackling in any realm on Earth, even if everything broke down at a far greater rate than in the awakened world. Was it possible that he had acquired some void abilities in addition to everything else?

“Aren’t we fighting?” the phone guardian asked patiently.

Dallion didn’t register the question. Instead, he bent down and pressed a part of the ground with his index finger. The entire surface was a shiny black plastic with metal woven in here and there—like the world’s largest circuit board. Within moments, a new crack formed under his finger; it was more than a crack; it was a spider web of cracks... just as Nox used to make.

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Dallion asked. “Make a crack in the shape of a cross, if so.”

Just as requested, two thicker cracks emerged in the exact fashion Dallion had asked.

“Holy crap,” he whispered. The whole of reality seemed to freeze, as Dallion felt as if he had found a forgotten part of himself.

Nox was actually alive? Back when he had sacrificed himself to create an opening in Simon’s barrier, Dallion thought that the creature had perished. It hadn’t. Somehow, it had remained within him and survived the trip back to Earth.

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Waves of joy swept through him, like when the crackling had become his companion for the very first time. There was no crackling to be seen, no little rascal to pet or play with, but Dallion knew he was there.

“Phone,” Dallion said, keeping an outwardly calm exterior. “I have good news and bad news.”

“It’s always ominous when you say that.” The guardian took a few steps closer. He didn’t like the cracks that constantly emerged, to put it lightly, yet had developed a philosophical attitude, accepting them as inevitable when Dallion was close by.

“The bad news is that we’ll have to postpone the fight for a bit,” Dallion said.

“The good news is that you won’t be getting any more cracks.”

“Cracks are inevitable,” the guardian said, sinking into the ground. “Call me when you’re ready.”

Dallion quickly moved to a clear spot of ground and sat down.

“Are you able to write?” he asked.

No cracks emerged. Apparently, that was one skill the crackling hadn’t acquired despite spending a large part of its existence in a ring library.

Thinking back to the final battle, Dallion went through all the events with Nox. The crackling had received nine wounds, each decreasing its health by ten percent. At the tenth it had burned up, fading away. Still, there had never been a red rectangle.

“Sneaky.” Dallion shook his head. “You’ve been in my realm all this time, haven’t you?”

A cross of cracks emerged beneath his finger.

“Is anyone else there?”

Nothing followed.

“Make a spiderweb crack for a no.”

Still nothing.

“You don’t know?”

Another cross mark emerged.

That made sense to some degree. Dallion didn’t have access to his realm here, suggesting that maybe his companions didn’t, either. That didn’t mean they hadn’t crossed the world with Dallion, but didn’t mean they hadn’t, either.

“Is that why I’ve been breaking everything?” Dallion asked. “You’ve been trying to get my attention?”

Two crosses emerged. That explained quite a few things. Dallion’s friends had joked that he might be cursed, since a lot of things he touched would break. As it turned out, they had been right all along; only it wasn’t a curse, but rather an old friend.

“Can you appear?” Dallion moved his finger to a new spot. Instantly a spiderweb crack appeared.

So much for that. Apparently, familiars also had significant limitations in this world. It was for the better, though. Dallion dreaded to think the damage a runaway crackling would cause if set loose on Earth. Thinking about it, could he be certain that there weren’t such instances? He remembered seeing things collapse without reason as a child. There would be something every month either on the news or on online videos. In the majority of the cases, a reasonable explanation had been provided, yet one couldn’t help but wonder.

“Can you see everything around me?” Dallion moved his finger again.

Half a spiderweb crack appeared. Likely, the answer was a conditional yes.

“You can only see what I’m looking at?” Dallion asked.

A cross emerged, making it clear that the familiars were in the very strictest sense a part of him. That did raise an interesting possibility, though. If one companion was part of him, there was a chance that the others were as well.

“Gleam, are you here?” Dallion asked.

Nothing changed.

“If you are, cast an illusion over the cracks.”

It would have been nice if an illusion had taken place. Then Dallion would have known for certain that more of his companions were present. One by one, he called out to the rest, giving them instructions on what to do to make their presence known. None of them reacted.

“Seems it’s only you and me, buddy,” Dallion said at last. “Architects and cracklings aren’t welcome in the new awakened world.”

On the other hand, this could also be seen as a favor. If Nox had remained there, he would have been purged along with every other drop of void. This way, he had survived in some form, even if he was closer to an imaginary friend than an actual creature. Even so, he did present a rather substantial advantage—Dallion would be able to break anything he touched at will.

“I really should have taught you how to write.” Dallion stood up.

A large crack forming beneath his shoe indicated that Nox didn’t share his opinion.

“Stop complaining. It would have been good for you. We would be able to have a proper conversation right now.” He paused for a moment. “Although, maybe if I learn some of my other skills, you’ll be able to talk to me again.”

A cross shaped pair of cracks emerged beneath his other foot.

Realm section damaged!

Overall completion 69%

A red rectangle appeared.

“First thing’s first. No more cracks unless I tell you,” Dallion said.

Normally, the lack of new cracks would be reassuring. Since this was Nox, though, there was no telling whether he agreed with the instructions or didn’t give a damn, and so had chosen not to respond. One could only hope it was the latter.

“Phone,” Dallion said. “Let’s fix you up.”

COMBAT INITIATED

The guardian emerged from the ground twenty feet away with a leap.

Reacting to the red rectangle, Dallion quickly split into three instances. Unlike all the previous fights, this time he started whistling.

Initially, there didn’t seem to be any noticeable effect. Dallion kept avoiding the phone’s attacks, taking advantage of the green awakened markers triggered by his guard skill. Now and again, he’d use acrobatics to leap over a low kick, yet he stubbornly refused to attack.

“You can’t win if you’re always on the defensive,” the guardian said. “I thought we went through this the last three times.”

“Patience,” Dallion said. On this occasion, his music skills took hold.

Finally, matching the pitch and frequency, the music threads attached to the guardian’s “arm” causing the entity to freeze for a moment.

As much as the phone was skilled in combat—scarily so, for a mobile phone—he proved defenseless against music. The pause was more than enough for Dallion to use his attack skills and perform a multi-attack on the guardian’s torso.

AVERAGE STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 50%

AVERAGE STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 50%

AVERAGE STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 50%

“Spark!” Dallion said as he kept on punching. “Point attack!”

Unfortunately, neither happened. It was through pure old-fashioned persistence that he depleted the phone’s health, causing the guardian to shatter, ejecting Dallion into the real world.

When Dallion looked at the phone in his hand once more, it appeared brand new.

“Not bad,” Dallion thought. It would have been nice to have managed to perform a point attack, but getting Nox was more than he could possibly hope for.

Cautiously, he tapped on the touchscreen. No cracks emerged.

Without delay, Dallion dialed Atol’s number. After two rings, she picked up.

“Hey,” Dallion said before she had a chance to speak. “How do you feel about going to Colorado?”

Chapter 974: The Mage Connection

“What’s in Colorado?” Atol asked.

Even with her ability to convince, it had taken half a day to visit. One might say that it was due to the strict patient regulations in the med center. In truth, it was more likely that she didn’t want to bother.

Interestingly enough, she wasn’t among those who’d witnessed Dallion’s fainting. If she had, maybe there would have been a bit more clarity on the matter.

“Someone who really hates me.” Dallion kept moving his arm in an attempt to pinpoint the source of the pain. Currently, it was more of a discomfort, as if there was an invisible scar just beneath the skin. “A mage.”

“Oh,” the woman said with an expression that let everyone know she was familiar with the concept. “Never could stand those ass kissing shitheads. What did you do to get him mad?”

“This or that.”

Dallion had a history with Alien ever since he was part of the Icepicker guild back in Nerosal. Back then, the old man was following the emperor’s orders, assisting in the assassination of a member of the imperial family and giving the city to the Star.

Looking at things now, Dallion suspected that the real plan was to pay off the void, as well as initiate a series of events that would result in an overall war between everyone. It had taken a few years to pull off, but ultimately, it had worked, bringing the Tamin emperor one step away from becoming the next architect. No doubt Alien still felt a lot of resentment towards Dallion. A more important question was whether Moon vows remained in effect on Earth.

“Fine.” Atol gave him a skeptical look. “Where exactly in Colorado?”

Dallion looked at the woman. His mind was still focusing on how to handle the meeting. Alien was paranoid in the other world and with good reason. If he had retained his memories—which wasn’t a guarantee—he would be far less welcoming than the Architect’s wife.

“Centennial,” Dallion said after a few seconds.

“Don’t know crap about the place. Hope there’s a functioning airport anywhere near.”

“We’re driving there.”

“Are you crazy? Do you have any idea how long it will—”

“Driving,” Dallion said adamantly.

“Why not?” Atol shook her head. “Let’s just go halfway across the country because reasons.” She went to the door. “I’ll arrange things with administration. Want me to get you out of here?”

“I have that,” Dallion replied. “Should be out by noon.”

In truth, Dallion had enough experience with his new music skill to walk out right now. There was one thing he wanted to check before that, though. For that, he needed to be in the medical center, in case things went wrong.

“Okay.” The woman opened the door, then stopped. “I got you a lighter.” She reached into her pocket, then tossed it to Dallion. “I guess you won’t be needing it anymore.”

Dallion caught the item and looked at it. It was surprisingly fancy, suggesting that Atol had convinced someone well-off to give it to her. Out of curiosity, he pressed the button, looking at the faint spark that came with the click.

Moving his finger closer only gave him a light prick.

What was I thinking, he thought, tossing it on his bed. The idea was almost as crazy as what he intended to do now.

Taking a good look outside through one of the two windows in the room, Dallion went to his bed stand and opened the drawer. His personal items were kept there: keys, the alarm for his new car, wallet, a few coins, the obligatory medical consent form, and his mobile phone.

Reaching inside, Dallion took the keys. There were several of them. Most were a long and squarish shape, but there was still one with the sharp jagged side.

Here's goes nothing, Dallion thought as he rolled up his sleeve. Then he used his attack skills to create a wound on the side of his arm, just beneath the shoulder.

A thin line of red emerged, then started bleeding.

"I really hope you're there, Lux," Dallion said, rolling his sleeve back down. "I'm relying on you, buddy."

All that he could do now was wait. If all went well, the wound would be gone by evening. If not, then Nox was the only companion who had come across with him.

Wasting no further time, Dallion got fully dressed, took all his personal items, then left the room. Just to be sure, he took a look at the door handle once he released it. It was in perfect condition, with no signs of cracks whatsoever.

Several people approached Dallion as he made his way along the corridor. A quick conversation later they were on their way, completely forgetting the encounter. As far as they were concerned, Dallion was only here to visit a friend, so there was no need to be concerned or give the matter any thought.

The outside seemed markedly brighter than yesterday, as if someone had saturated the colors. The sky seemed bluer, the grass and leaves seemed greener. Even the grayness of the buildings seemed somehow sharper. More notably, Dallion could feel emanations of emotions once more. Thankfully, they weren't coming from the thousands of items in the immediate area. People, on the other hand, were a different matter.

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It was no wonder that everyone in college behaved in roughly the same way. The entire campus was filled with love, lust, and fear—fear of what people might think, almost exclusively. The only exceptions seemed to be the people who worked there, who appeared like dark clouds, emanating a deep sense of emotional fatigue.

With a few hours left, by his assumption, Dallion decided to try to find Jenna. To his surprise, she was still nowhere to be found. All he managed was to come across Jenna's roommate, who was just as clueless as he was.

"Just gone?" Dallion asked, using his music skills to make the girl a bit more gossipy.

"She said she needed a few days to herself," the girl said. "I thought she was off to chase after you, but it seems not."

"Oh."

“She’s really into you, you know.” A smile appeared on her face. “I’d be too, if you were my type. Why do you act like you’re taken?”

“Why do you think I’m not?”

“You? Come on!” The girl chuckled. “I’d have seen the signs. You don’t hang out with anyone in particular. Given how many guys have a crush on our new temp, they would have noticed if you were tangling with her.”

Despite himself, Dallion found discussing rumors of his love life intriguing. It was almost like watching a soap opera he couldn’t pull away from.

“Maybe she’s not from here.”

“Really? Someone from back home?” The girl gave him a critical look. “You didn’t bother to fix your phone for ages and spent more time trying to find some unknown spotify band. If you had anyone anywhere off campus, you’d be spending all your time talking to her. More importantly, she’d have spent all her time calling you. All the calls you got were from your parents.”

There was no denying that. In another life, the girl would have made a good detective... if love drama was the focus of her investigations.

“So, you’ve no idea where she is?”

“She’s definitely not home. Don’t tell her this, but she might be playing hard to get,” the girl said in a conspiratorial voice. “I mean. You’re finally back and she sets off somewhere without a word? Classic way of making you jealous. And it worked. You’re here after all.”

That sounded a bit underhanded, though not impossible. But somehow, that didn’t sound like something Jenna would do. While Dallion had only known her for less than a few months, all his senses told him it was something else. There was no denying that she was interested in him, but not to the degree to pull something like this. Or maybe she was, and he hadn’t noticed? With a lot of his abilities still locked, he couldn’t be certain.

“If you hear from her, can you tell her I want to talk to her when I get back?” he asked.

“Back? Going somewhere again?”

“Yeah... it’s a family emergency.”

“You’ve been getting a lot of those.”

“That’s life for you. We don’t choose what surrounds us.”

“That...” The girl tapped her lips with her index finger several times. “That actually sounds deep. I’m stealing it.”

Based on the sudden burst of emotions emanating from her, it was likely she was going to use the phrase to impress someone.

“Go ahead.”

Dallion quickly left and made his way to the parking lot. His car was there, eagerly waiting to end her motionless state. Atol was also present.

“All done. We’re off to deal with a family matter,” she said.

“Do you always use that excuse?” He tossed her the car keys and sat in the passenger’s seat.

“It’s simple, so it works best. It’s close to heart for the people that work here. I can do it for years and they’ll agree each time.” She joined him in the car and slammed the door shut. “For people with money, it’s all about investments.”

“Even if they lose money?”

“Even if they lose money,” she set off. “You know it’ll take us nineteen hours to get to Centennial? I did some checking.”

“I think it’ll take us a bit less. The car likes to go fast.”

Atol looked at him.

“That’s going fast. We won’t be taking any breaks, either.”

“Can you handle it?”

In response, the woman went full throttle, holding the pedal to the metal as she drove out of the parking lot and onto the road. Having the perception and reaction speed not to worry about anything unexpected, and the skill to get out of any jam, made driving an entirely different experience. Dallion still would have preferred to fly, though. Technically, he had a valid driver’s license, but he really didn’t feel the need to use it.

To his surprise, the trip felt a lot more enjoyable than he expected. Maybe it was due to his newly developed music skills. Maybe it was because he had found his first companion, but for some reason he felt a whole lot freer, even if he didn’t look forward to seeing Alien again.

“So, where’s the mage we’ll be seeing?” Atol asked.

“I don’t know. He just said he’s from there.”

“And you’re sure that by that he meant he’s still there? I’m over a thousand miles from where I’m from.”

“Doesn’t matter. As long as we find a trace we can track him down.” Dallion opened the glove compartment. The car’s license was there, along with a few business cards belonging to the people who had sold—or rather given—the car to Atol. Dallion took one of them.

“You mean me,” the woman corrected.

“You have the experience. You don’t have to use your music as much as I.”

“Cheeky fucker.” She shook her head with a wincing smile. Already he outmatched her in every way and she knew it. “What if your friend has retained his magic?” she asked. “We might be in serious trouble then.”

“Magic and music are alike. We should be fine.”

“We weren’t fine last time.” Her emotions abruptly changed. “The architect could have killed us if he wanted. He had us. Why didn’t he do it?”

In perfect honesty, Dallion had no answer to that.

“Don’t know. Maybe he didn’t want to risk angering the Moons.”

“Because you’re so special?”

“One Architect killing another is bound to pose questions. I’m surprised we’re even in the same time period.”

It wasn’t the best argument, though it sounded plausible enough. Personally, Dallion wouldn’t have risked it, either. Then again, he had no intention of killing anyone.

“Okay, but you’re taking the lead. I’m not going against a mage for your sake.”

“Sure.” A tear appeared on the business card Dallion was holding. Nox had just indicated he’d have Dallion’s back.

“Where the hell did you cut yourself?” the woman asked all of a sudden. “You’ve got blood all over your sleeve?”

Instinctively, Dallion looked at it and pulled it up. A considerable amount of blood had soaked into his shirt, yet underneath there was no sign of a wound, not even a scar.

Good to see you’re here, Lux, Dallion thought with a smile.

“I guess I must have brushed against something,” he replied. “I’ll get a new shirt when we get to Centennial.”

Chapter 975: The Trip to Centennial

The entire trip was mostly spent between fighting in the awakening realm and sleeping. Even with the re-acquired bonuses, giving his all turned out to be exhausting, especially since he made a point to suffer a blow or two with the goal of gaining the final common skill. On the fifth time he succeeded, bringing his total amount of skills to five.

There was a time when that would have seemed exceptional. Right now, Dallion felt like he hadn’t even reached fifty percent of his full potential.

You could have at least given me a few hints, he thought, semi-awake.

Thinking back, the Architect had shared nothing at all. Of course, it hadn't seemed so at the time. Dallion was so overwhelmed that he believed the entire universe to have doubled in size.

Calling him didn't help either. Atol had tried once only to fall victim to a far subtler use of music skill. Dallion had sensed it through the phone. It was elegant, precise, and a clear warning that the man didn't want anything to do with them.

"You up?" Atol shoved Dallion in the shoulder, ensuring that he was.

Initially, Dallion didn't react, yet the shift in his breathing told the woman all she wanted to know.

"I'll stop to get some gas," she said. "Want anything?"

The thought of gas station cuisine quickly made him lose any appetite.

"Something bland." Dallion cracked an eye open. "And water." So much for having been a hunter.

"Chewing gum? It's the only thing that's worth fuck."

Considering the nutritional qualities of all other choices, the description was unusually apt. Even so, Dallion shook his head. There were bigger concerns than food right now. As much as he didn't show it, he knew Atol to be right. If Alien had retained his magic skill, he wasn't going to hesitate to use it. It all depended on how long it had taken him to restore it. Given the time that passed since the leveling up of the awakened world, there was roughly a one in five chance that he had retained his spellcraft and if so... the city could well have transformed into his private domain. The only assurance Dallion had was that all skills were a lot weaker on Earth than they had been in the other world.

The distant sound of motorbikes filled the night. It started subtly, though with Dallion's perception it was easy to catch a fair distance away. The more the bikes got near, the more he could tell there were at least a dozen of them. That wasn't so good. Dallion wasn't afraid that anything might happen. At the same time, he was perfectly aware that a college kid in an expensive car was bound to make them stop.

Sure enough, it happened.

"Hey." The first biker stopped right next to Dallion's car.

At this point, the confrontation had started. Ignoring the man would be worse than pretty much everything else.

"Hey," Dallion replied with a casual smile.

"Nice car you have there. Gift from your dad?"

"Nah, my girlfriend got it for me." Dallion's intent wasn't to be confrontational, but he couldn't keep himself from adding a verbal jab. His hope was that his music skills would be able to keep things from escalating. Unfortunately, there were a few things he hadn't taken into account.

The noise of the approaching bikes had diminished the effect of his music skills. Also, the amount of alcohol the biker had consumed made his reactions less predictable.

There was no obvious explanation for what followed. Maybe it was a simple mishearing, or maybe the man had come with the explicit intent to get into a fight. Whatever the reason, he leaped off his bike, leaving it to fall to the ground, aiming to hit Dallion in the face.

From the perspective of an awakened, the action was sluggish, if surprising. There were a multitude of options open, but Dallion chose to go on the aggressive side. Placing both hands onto the seat beneath him, he lifted himself, then bent and extended his legs, hitting the other in the face with both feet.

“Combat initiated,” he whispered, pushing himself out of the car. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to hurt her.

Two more bikers got off their bikes, rushing at him. Unlike their unconscious gang member, they were quick to draw weapons—knives and brass knuckles—almost as if they knew that they were outmatched.

“Better stay inside,” Dallion yelled, the warning meant for Atol.

In the other world, a level five awakened could easily take a dozen skilled mercenaries, provided he had enough experience. Here, Dallion estimated his capabilities to be half that.

A long-haired man with a leather jacket thrust with his left hand, aiming to cut Dallion with his knife. The action was clear provocation. Dallion could easily tell that the man was left-handed and was just prepping for the real attack.

Lowering his torso, Dallion performed a low sweeping kick, tumbling his opponent instantly. The kick was instantly followed up with a multi-attack series of punches. The first quickly knocked out the long-haired, while the next incapacitated the muscular one with the brass knuckles.

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Three down, Dallion thought, quickly leaping back into a free area on the street. There still were at least nine others.

“Nice moves,” one of them said, as he sped up, aiming for Dallion with his bike.

Are you an idiot? Dallion thought. If he were in their place, the last thing he’d do was attempt one-to-one battles. Since they were providing him with the opportunity, he felt compelled to oblige them.

Using his athletic skills, he leaped up, then spun, kicking the man clear off the bike and onto the ground.

“Had enough?” he shouted, using his music skills to their fullest. This time, there was an effect. The remaining group seemed to freeze still, all attention focused on Dallion. “You better go now,” he ordered. “No one wants any trouble. If we keep this up, the feds will be here.”

Of all the things he could have said, that was the worst. Dallion had no idea why he had resorted to using the “feds.” In his mind, that had sounded more threatening, but it also made no sense

whatsoever. There was no chance that anyone from law enforcement, let alone federal agents, would be anywhere near at this time of night. Even if Atol had made a call and convinced them to go there, it would take them at least several hours to do so.

The man that was kicked off his bike slowly started getting up with a groan. The others remained where they were, though Dallion could sense the fear and doubt emanating from them. Their conscious minds knew that the threat was idle, yet thanks to his music skills, they felt they didn't want to take the risk. Either that, or they didn't want to get even more humiliated by a college kid.

"I won't forget this, kid," one of them—probably the leader—said. "You're dead."

"I doubt it." Dallion kept on using his music skill. "I'm no one in particular."

For several more seconds, the gang leader kept on staring at Dallion. Then, he tilted his head, indicating for the others to grab the unconscious members of his gang.

Remaining calm but ready, Dallion watched them come to, then be dragged to their bikes. The noise of motors filled the air again as one by one the bikers rode off, leaving Dallion behind.

Once all of them had disappeared along the road, Atol finally came out, carrying a small plastic bag.

"You okay?" Dallion asked instinctively. The confidence emanating from the woman quickly told him that she was. "Let's go."

"Hold on." The woman approached, tossing him a can of soda. "Aren't you curious what happened in there?"

Dallion frowned.

"I'm not in the mood—"

"When I tried to convince him to have the gum for free, a lamp next to him flickered. The man quickly grabbed his phone and dialed a single number. I've never seen so much fear emanating from anyone. When I used my music skills to calm him down, the lamp exploded."

That was unusual to put it lightly. There always was the possibility that it had been a coincidence, but there wasn't anyone who seriously believed it.

Stay on guard, Dallion told the car, then rushed into the building.

The inside was as bad as one expected. Cheap racks contained cheap food products and some tools. The floor and walls had acquired so much dirt that at this point, there was no way they'd accumulate more. The lighting was dim. There were no security cameras, and the only person in the place lay unconscious on the floor. There were no signs of wounds, suggesting that he had either fainted on his own, or Atol had convinced him to.

What the woman had described as a lamp was little more than a bare bulb on a colored stand. Dallion was about to pull the cable powering it out of its socket when he noticed that there was nothing connecting it to anything.

Hello, counter, he said, keeping his distance.

Yo, the counter replied. What up?

That was neither the voice, not the lexicon Dallion expected, but he continued.

Who brought the lamp? Dallion asked.

Blinky? He's been here for ages. Some shiny guy like you came here and left him.

Already Dallion had a bad feeling.

What was special about him?

Hell if I know, man. Guy came, left Blinky and left.

Did he talk to you?

Nah. You the first to do that.

An awakened had been through here, that was for certain, but it didn't sound like any awakened—it had to be a mage. The visit also hadn't been a social call. The person was marking his perimeter.

"Anything interesting?" Atol joined him. As someone who could have anything, she didn't bother taking anything more from the gas station.

"How far are we from Centennial?" he asked.

"An hour tops. Why?"

An hour... "Do we have enough gas to get there?"

"You think I'd have stopped at this shitstop if we did?"

Dallion didn't reply.

"It's your friend, isn't it?" she asked. "Looks like he's expecting you."

"Someone is."

The bikers had gotten a good look at him, which meant if Alien had set this up, they'd be able to provide a full description. Getting into town became all that more dangerous. On the positive side, at least there was a strong chance that he was there. No one set up patrols and warning systems if they were elsewhere.

Looking around, Dallion went to a rack full of cheap T-shirts and took one. The piece of clothing was tossed over the remains of the lamp, then used as a sort of sack, as Dallion picked up what was left of the device.

"Let's go." He rolled the whole thing into a ball, then left.

Getting gas was easier than expected. There were several safeguards ensuring that people couldn't just fill up their tank and then drive off without paying. However, a quick conversation with the pump—and a touch of music skills—easily bypassed them.

The magic device, still wrapped in the T-shirt, was tossed to the side of the road as far as Dallion could manage. With that done, the trip continued.

“So, what do we do now?” Atol asked. “Go somewhere with lots of people?”

“No. He’ll be prepared for this. When I used music on the bikers, it didn’t always have an effect.”

“There goes my usefulness.”

“Not quite. He isn’t expecting you. He doesn’t know what you look like. If we’re quick, we can find him before that.”

“How? Check every building in Centennial?” Atol snorted.

“Just the highly secure ones. Mages like to be protected. He can’t be good at convincing people, or he’d have used someone more competent. My guess is that he’s used money to get some hired help.”

“That narrows it down a bit. I guess we’re searching for someone rich?”

“Not only. I think someone told me he used to be a programmer.”

Chapter 976: A Mage's Greeting

Many things were said about the Shimmering Circle back in the awakened world. Sometimes the group was a monolithic whole, at other times the only thing that united them was their bitterness towards each other.

From what Dallion remembered, Alien was said to be a coder or a gamer, or sometimes both. That didn’t say much other than that he had to be from the same time period.

As it turned out, Centennial was the perfect place for someone like that. Comcast, United Launch Alliance, and Arrow Electronics were just three of the potentials that fulfilled Dallion’s initial requirements. Any of them could well be Alien’s employer. Checking would be tricky even for someone with Atol’s skills, provided that Dallion couldn’t be sure about the mage’s real name. Alien was edgy as a gamer tag, though hardly a real name. Just for the sake of it, he did make a few calls to check the local registry.

At first Dallion decided to rely on the various item guardians to get a clue. It would have been a lot simpler if he could ask the road itself where the bikers had gone to, or even if it had noticed any other awakened. Shop windows, lampposts, and other large items were the only option. Sadly, it soon turned out that they were less useful than one might suspect.

Thanks, anyway. Dallion took out his phone as he moved away from the traffic light. He was about to phone Atol when he found that he had several messages. A few were from his mother, wanting to check how he was doing. One was from the administration regarding some trivial matter. And the final two were from his roommate. It appeared that Jenna had returned and had passed by his room to check on Dallion. That was sort of a relief, though it would certainly lead to a few

headaches once he returned. Putting the worries aside for the moment, Dallion made his call.

“Why the fuck did I listen to you?” the woman said instantly after picking up.

“Problems?”

“Oh, no problems. I spent over an hour going through the building. A bit more and HR was about to kill me.”

“Found anything?”

“If it were anyone else, I’d say he definitely isn’t here.”

“No luck here, either. None of the guardians know a thing.”

“How’s that even possible?”

“This isn’t the awakened world. Most guardians don’t see further than a few feet.”

“Don’t give me that shit.”

There was no blaming her comment. While strictly speaking Dallion was correct, awakened were a lot more noticeable than normal people. The closest comparison would be seeing a lantern in the fog. The fact that none had seen anything was alarming.

“Got you something about the bikers,” Atol said, to Dallion’s surprise. “You were right—they’re a regular occurrence here. Everyone knows they’re trouble, including the cops, it seems.”

“But no one does anything about it,” Dallion continued her train of thought.

“Thanks. I’ll follow up on that. You keep up with things on your end.”

“Yay me...” The sarcasm in her voice dripped over the call.

“You’re safer there. He won’t dare do anything with people around. Just don’t get stuck alone.”

“Who do you take me for? I’ve convinced a few people to be nearby at all times. Let’s hope none of them are married.”

“Call me if you find anything else.” Dallion ended the call. He had noticed something unsettling. And just to make sure, he combat split into three instances and looked around.

Of the dozens of people walking about the city, close to a quarter were watching him. Attempts were made for it to be subtle, though awakened senses could easily spot the tell-tell signs.

Are you making your move? Dallion kept walking.

One of his instances grabbed a nearby person by the collar.

“Where’s the mage?” he asked, using his music skills.

Instead of an answer, though, the man promptly fainted, forcing Dallion to pick another instance to become reality. Brute strength wasn’t going to help him here.

“Nox,” Dallion whispered. “I’ll need you soon. Get ready.”

A minuscule crack appeared on a tile beneath Dallion’s foot. Back in the awakened world, Dallion wouldn’t have hesitated making the first move. Things were different here. Getting into a public fight with an entire town wasn’t something that would go unnoticed and even music skills wouldn’t make it go away, not when a mage was pulling the strings.

Pretending not to notice, Dallion went to the first pub he saw and immediately went to the toilet.

“If you’re here, I could use some help, Gleam,” he said, looking into the mirror. “I need a bit of illusion, just enough to look like someone else.”

Dallion closed his eyes, then counted to five. When he opened them again, his usual reflection stared back. Some things were too much to ask. He’d have to do it the hard way.

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There were two ways of finding a mage: use any means to track him down, or provoke him into revealing himself. The second was out of the question—Alien wasn’t the sort of person that would charge in. The first was also questionable. Given he had gone through the trouble to hire at least one biker gang to patrol the road to town, he undoubtedly had set up other countermeasures.

“You never make it easy, do you?” Dallion asked. It was like the Academy all over again. If that was the case, though, there was one thing that no mage could escape from.

Rushing out, Dallion went to the bar counter.

“A soda,” he said, taking a seat.

The bartender gave him a disgusted look, then took a random can from a small fridge and slammed it in front of Dallion.

“There’s no need for that,” Dallion said, using his music skill to add some joy and understanding into the man. “Tough day?”

“Family stuff,” the other said, his attitude changing in real time. “New here?”

“Yep. Here for a job interview.” Dallion took the can, but didn’t open it. “I think I flunked. You need any help?”

“Sorry, kid. Last one I hired was crap, and he looked more skilled than you.”

You might be surprised, Dallion thought. “I had to try. I bet it takes a lot of bureaucracy to start running a place like this.”

“You’ve no idea. There’s—”

“Electric,” Dallion interrupted. “I bet they’re always breathing down your neck.”

The push was a bit more forceful than he would have liked, but he didn’t have the luxury of taking chances.

“Do you have an emergency contact number?”

“Number?” The bartender laughed. “Where’s you been? Haven’t used that in years. It’s all—”

“I need the number.” Dallion combat split. He had noticed more and more people coming in. They weren’t regulars, or even customers, for that matter. None of them approached the bar or even asked for a drink. All they would do was slowly gather, filling up the space a few people at a time.

“Hold on. I’ll get it for you.” The bartender took out his phone and started scrolling on it.

Meanwhile, one of Dallion’s instances turned around. Over twenty people had gathered in the pub, filling all the tables and even more. None of them seemed to have any weapons, though Dallion couldn’t discount that.

“Here.” The bartender showed Dallion his phone. “Good luck getting a human to talk to you.”

No doubt the man would have said more, if several of the new arrivals hadn’t drawn a gun on Dallion.

Dallion’s combat skills instantly triggered. Combining acrobatics and guard skills, he leaped out of the firing area and to the side. While doing so, he also used attack and athletics to grab a barstool and throw it at one of his attackers.

Gunfire erupted. For a split second, Dallion thought back to the time he’d fought the Star. Those were the only instances in which he’d faced firearms. Alien was clearly set on killing him.

Dashing to the nearest table, Dallion used a series of kicks to knock the people there out, then turned the table. His combat splitting allowed him to be a bit more daring, immediately going on the offensive. After all, attack was the best defense, not to mention that if he turned this into a brawl, it would discourage people from using weapons.

People from outside continued pouring in. Now that everyone knew the fight had started, there was no stopping them.

The fight itself didn’t present too much of a threat. The goal seemed to be to overwhelm Dallion, but that had no chance of working. Their actions were so slow that it was as if reality had gone into slow motion. It was child’s play for Dallion to move between the people, dealing a few strikes as he did. If anything, his greatest concern was not to harm the attackers too much. It was obvious by the emanations coming from them that they were affected by external factors. Not one emanated hatred,

anger, or fear. One could say that they were just going about their business, which in this case happened to be attempting to kill Dallion.

Engaging enemies, Dallion took out his phone with his left hand and dialed Atol again. If he was in trouble, there was a chance that he was. Annoyingly, she didn't pick up right away.

Come on, Dallion cursed internally. Just pick it up.

A large man in a business suit attempted to punch Dallion in the face, hitting a woman beside him instead. With minimal effort, Dallion evaded, then grabbed the man's hand, pulling him off balance. With a loud slam, the man fell on the floor. It was at this point that Atol finally responded.

"What?" she almost shouted. "I'm trying to—"

"Get out of there!" Dallion interrupted. "Go somewhere safe and call me."

"What the fuck?!"

"He's onto me, which means he's onto you too."

"Shit." Atol hung up.

That was one person out of danger. All that was left was for Dallion to get out of the mess as well. Sadly, that was becoming more and more difficult. So far, he had rendered probably a dozen people unconscious, but that didn't even slow down the rest, not to mention that more people were still coming from outside. The way this was going, he could well find himself physically trapped in a crush of bodies, despite not getting hit.

The room was small, with one single exit. All the windows were in the direction of the street and well out of reach. In several instances Dallion attempted making a run for it, or even jumping out. Each time, someone in the crowd would manage to grab him by the leg and stop him. For all intents and purposes, it was like trying to run through a sea of quicksand.

"Nox!" Dallion ordered.

Two large spiderweb cracks appeared on the floor beneath him. Quickly they intensified, until it gave through, causing him and several more people to fall into the basement below.

Taking advantage of the moment of confusion, Dallion rushed towards the nearest window in sight and leapt through it. The opening was small, barely enough for a person to squeeze through. Having the physical and mental ability to jump at the precise angle and with the necessary strength made going through it easily.

The window burst as Nox affected it upon contact, leaving Dallion flying out into the side street. At first glance, there didn't seem to be many people around. That allowed Dallion to rush up the side of a building onto the roof. Given the wideness of the city and how sparse the buildings were in the area, that didn't provide much of an advantage, but enough to strongly diminish the threat.

Quickly evaluating the situation, Dallion started running. Right now, two things were of utmost importance. One was to get somewhere safe where to wait for Atol's call. The other—make a phone call.

Using the number the bartender had given him, Dallion phoned the local electric company. After a few seconds of choosing options, he finally managed to get a human on the line.

“How may I be of assistance?” the woman on the other end of the line said.

“Statistics,” Dallion said, using his music skills to make the person more trusting. “I’m making a survey on the effect of electromagnetic fields on the environment and would like to know the spots where the greatest activity are.”

Chapter 977: The Mansion of Illusions

As a child Dallion would adore watching zombie movies with his friends. It was discouraged by their parents, which automatically made it interesting. Also, there was a lot of blood, violence, and jump scares. Nearly always the watching session would be followed by a “series” discussion regarding how one would survive in a zombie apocalypse.

Right now, Dallion didn’t have to imagine it. Whatever Alien had done effectively had transformed a large party of the people into the equivalent. They weren’t slow, decomposing, nor did they seek brains. Laying eyes on him was enough for even old ladies to become violent and set off to fight him.

Keeping out of sight, Dallion watched a rather expensive car drop off Atol a few roads away. Despite his warning she had convinced someone to lend a hand. Thankfully, she was cautious enough not to let him see Dallion.

With a whisper she made the man drive off, then—only after making sure that no one was looking at her—did she pick up the phone.

Dallion’s mobile vibrated.

“Nice car,” Dallion whispered.

“Haven’t you learned by now?” The woman spoke casually, but there was slight tension in her words. “Where are you?”

“Head towards the oak, then continue along the street. You’ll see me in a few miles.”

The woman looked in Dallion’s direction, but her perception trait had to be less than his, for she didn’t comment on noticing him.

“I really have no idea why I put up with this,” she hissed.

“Because you’re hoping that I’ll be able to help you relearn some of your skills, but mostly because you don’t want to remain alone in a world of awakened.”

“Shithead.” She closed the connection.

As she was approaching, Dallion went through his plan. In typical fashion, it was rather reckless. He had found what he suspected to be Alien’s home. What was left was to get there in one piece. Combat splitting gave him a substantial advantage, but it wasn’t foolproof—one mistake too many and Dallion could end up dead.

Putting his phone away, Dallion looked at his left hand. All the scars and scrapes had vanished, courtesy of Lux. Sadly, it wouldn’t be enough to stop a knife or bullet.

“I wish you were her old man,” Dallion said thinking of Adzorg. “At least then I’d know what spell your apprentice is using.”

In some ways it felt like music, but the general behavior didn’t fit. Also, when Dallion had tried using his own music skills to convince a biker to stop chasing me, there hadn’t been any effect.

The only thing he could think of was the use of a limiting echoes. It wouldn’t be the first time. Yet, to place echoes in so many peoples Alien would need a lot more than dedication.

It took ten minutes for Atol to reach Dallion. Even in these circumstances she refused to run, out of caution and pettiness in equal measure. Seeing that no one was following, Dallion stepped out of his hiding spot and went to meet her.

“You better have some good news.” The woman shook her head.

“I know where he is,” Dallion said.

“That’s it?” She didn’t sound at all impressed.

“Magic seems to require electricity in this world,” Dallion continued as if she had asked a completely different question. “There’s been one house that’s been using loads of it for years. The residents aren’t anything special, but they got approved for unlimited tier usage.”

“I got to live in a five-star hotel for a month without paying.”

“He’s there, I’m sure.” He turned around and looked in the opposite direction.

“Half a mile that way. You can see the house.”

There was only one house in the area and it didn’t seem at all what anyone would imagine the home of a powerful mage being. It was nice, and no doubt expensive, though hardly luxurious by any means. It would be great for someone out of college, yet anyone used to power and luxury would skip it for something at least three times as large.

“That?” Atol winced. “Mage standards have fallen a lot since my time.”

“It’s not what’s on the outside,” Dallion said with a serious expression. “The reason he’s constantly using so much power is to maintain the illusion spells inside.”

“Shit...” The woman managed to say. “That stuff works here?”

“Magic is magic. If you have the skill, it’s just a matter of finding the power source, thus... electricity.”

“So, we’re walking into a death trap?”

“You’re not.” Dallion tossed her his phone. “You’ll be the distraction.”

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The woman looked at the phone. It was obvious what Dallion was suggesting. He would be taking most of the risk, though her involvement wouldn't be completely risk free.

"You did this a lot there, didn't you?" It was probably the saddest comment one could make. "When do you want it?"

"Give me ten seconds and dial. Conta's name is Alien."

Saying that, Dallion combat split and dashed towards the building in question. A few months ago—or several years in the awakened world—he would have been terrified putting his life at risk like this. He had gained a lot of experience since then, plus there was a reason pushing him forward this time.

The ground beneath one of his instances suddenly gave in, then vanished altogether revealing a thin metal mesh covering a pit. It was an elegant and inventive use of illusion magic creating a low-cost trap.

Spikes, Alien? Dallion faded his instance in question, then split again. In his mind the COMBAT INITIATED rectangle had just lit up. He had made the first move and now it was time for the mage to respond.

A series of walls emerged surrounding the mage's building. Multiple illusions placed around it had changed focus, changing reality into what would serve Alien best. The move was surprisingly amateurish. Dallion had expected a lot more; maybe not the ground gaining shape of rays of destruction destroying half the neighborhood, but definitely more than this.

His instances ran changed directions. While one rushed straight for the neighborhood power pole. Relying so much on electricity Alien had made the choice to get a building physically close to it. That provided him the benefit of using large amounts of power from the entire grid when he needed to. It also made him vulnerable.

"Nox," Dallion said slapping his hand on the concrete base of the pole.

In less than a second a mesh of cracks formed all over its surface. No longer capable of maintaining its own weight, the pole tilted, then fell, tearing the tables as it did. The entire neighborhood was left without power. Soon enough everyone would be calling the electric company with complains and demands for an update of the situation. More importantly for Dallion, the wall surrounding Alien's house instantly vanished, replaced by a set of tiles covered in wires that formed complex patterns.

Got you, Dallion thought as he split again. Now both the external and internal defenses of the building were gone.

Three seconds remained in the ten seconds till Atol's call. Things hadn't gone exactly to plan, though it was still possible to use it to Dallion's advantage.

Placing his hand on the door was more than enough to break it open. One of his instances immediately rushed in... only to be shot into the corridor wall by a shotgun. The remaining instances paused, pressing against the walls on both sides of the door. Brute force wasn't going to be enough for victory.

Evaluating his options, Dallion simultaneously jumped on building's roof, went to the nearest ground floor window, and broke the door's hinges again. In two of the cases, Alien was waiting for him. Shots were triggered after the fall of the door and at Dallion's attempt to go through the window. Going through the roof, surprisingly, wasn't anticipated, so Dallion chose that as his reality. That alarmed him somewhat. If there was one thing that he knew it was that Alien wasn't stupid. He wouldn't never leave such an obvious weakness, unless he wanted to fool someone into a false sense of security.

Tiles, Dallion said using his empathy ability. Are there any traps beneath you?

Traps? Several of them asked surprised. There are no traps.

Just improvements, another added. The metal sheet beneath can withstand anything.

Metal... so, that was the mage's trick. For one, it was probably reinforced steel. For another, there was a good chance that it was covered in illusion symbols as well.

Right then a ringtone sounded. It was faint, no one without awakened skills would have even noticed, but Dallion did. Not only that, but he was able to pinpoint its location within the building. Despite recent events, it wasn't coming from the ground floor, but the second.

There could be many reasons for that. There was no reason for Alien to have the phone with him at all times. Dallion himself would leave it in his dorm on frequent occasions. However, the place that the phone usually was had to be the one most frequented.

Rushing along the roof, Dallion used his athletic and acrobatic skills to smash through two of the second-floor windows. In both instances he ended up in the same room. Neither was followed by a gunshot.

The room was small, full of cheap furniture, and a computer that had probably gone out of fashion in the year two thousand. Cables covered the walls forming symbols. Funnily enough, Dallion could recognize quite a few of them. Once the power was restored, the place would likely be at least ten times as large, pleasantly cool, and possibly full of waterfalls.

A pair of shots punctured the door of the room, followed by the start of a click—the mage was reloading. This was it—the best opportunity Dallion would get. Splitting again, he leaped into the door. Splinters exploded all around, as Dallion entered the corridor. A man with a rather impressive rifle was there, in the process of reloading.

Instantly, Dallion grabbed the weapon. He expected Alien to put up some resistance, but surprisingly he was able to pull it out of the man's hands even before Nox could break it.

It was only then that Dallion got a good look at the man. There could be no mistake that it was the last archmage of the Academy. Alien's features were recognizable, even if he appeared four times younger. Skinny, unshaven, wearing a pair of clothes that most people would throw out, there was nothing left from the grandeur the man had in the awakened world.

“Alien?” Dallion asked, unable to believe his eyes.

The other didn't say a thing, staring forward in sheer terror.

“What are the rest of your countermeasures?” Dallion asked, using his music skills to nudge the man. “Are there guards in the house?”

“No guards,” the other replied. “Can’t be trusted.”

The response made one thing clear. Alien wasn’t making an attempt to take over Centennial, he was hiding from someone, or possibly something. All the layers of protection were just that—a means to ensure that the mage knew when other awakened came close and could deal with them.

“Who’s after you?”

Alien didn’t say a word.

“Why are you hiding?”

The sound of a creak caught Dallion’s attention. It seemed that there was someone else in the house, after all.

With Alien’s mobile still ringing in the background, Dallion split into instances. Letting go of Alien in one of them, he rushed along the corridor. There was no telling who he’d stumble on. It could be an unsuspecting guest or it could be another awakened.

As it turned out, it wasn’t too difficult to find out. Within moments, Katka emerged. Unlike alien, she appeared almost the same as she was in the awakened world, possibly a bit older.

“I thought it might be you,” she said, looking at Dallion. “And to answer your question, he’s hiding from everyone. There aren’t many mages in the world, and everyone who remembers hates us all.”

Chapter 978: Fake Personal Realm

Several dozen cars had gathered at the scene of the accident. Initially, just a few technicians from the electric company had been sent to check things out. They had quickly found that the problem was a lot more serious and phoned back for instructions. Their account had sounded so absurd that photo evidence had been required. After that, all hell broke loose. Emergency crews were sent, along with the fire department, local police, and an ambulance for good measure.

The commotion had quickly attracted the attention of the city council, multiple inspection offices, even people from the state administration. Ironically, the media were the only ones not interested.

Everyone was demanding answers. The local residents even wanted the accident fixed. Yet out of all of them, the only person who worked on overdrive was Atol, systematically chipping away at people’s concerns to the point that everyone was somehow convinced it was the wind that knocked the pole over.

An hour before that, Dallion had started the conversation with Alien and Katka. The differences between what they had been and what they had become on Earth were far greater than he could imagine. They had kept their memories and their spellcraft skill. As expected, magic was the trait of exceptions that gave awakened a far greater chance of remembering who they were. On the other hand, it had also failed to have them resolve their inner flaws. While one could argue that Alien was a lot better here than in the awakened world, Dallion couldn’t agree with that.

Standing at the window, Dallion kept looking outside, while two of his instances focused on the pair of mages in the room. Even without his music skills, he could tell that everyone was on edge. For some reason, he got the impression that he wasn't the reason for that.

"They'll fix it eventually," he said. "Who are you hiding from?"

"You," Alien replied, with a fake laugh. "The emperor, the archbishop, anyone else I've come across there."

There was some truth to his words, though not entirely.

"You tried to kill me first." Dallion remained calm. "The echoes, the illusions. That's more than a few safeguards."

Katka looked at Alien, yet the archmage didn't budge. His eyes locked on Dallion, as if he were afraid that if he looked away the boy might strike.

"What's really going on, Alien?"

There was no response.

"Do you want me to make a new Moon vow?"

"Moon vows..." the man shook his head. "They're nothing here. Astreza doesn't bother showing his face and Galatea's too far away. This place is absolute shit."

The phone in the room rang again. Still combat splitting, Dallion went to it in one instance and picked it up.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"It worked?" Atol sounded surprised.

"Yeah." Dallion went back to the window. He could barely see the woman approach between the trees. "You better call someone to get the power fixed. I'll have a chat with my friend until then."

"Is that a good idea? If the power is back up, he'll—"

"Thanks." Dallion ended the call. He was still able to hear her cursing all the distance away, though.

"New minion?" Alien asked.

"A friend. She'll make sure that you have power again."

"Yeah. And that'll make everything fine."

"I'm not the one who tried to kill you, Alien..."

"You've become a cultist, you hypocritical piece of shit!" The man stood up, despite Katka's attempt to keep him in his seat. "You came here with void

powers with the intention to kill! The moment you asked where I lived, I knew you'd come here to finish me off. It took you a decade, but here you are, ready to finish the job."

"And I had hoped you'd have left your paranoia back there."

Dallion felt sorry for the man. That was what happened when someone used magic to cover up the flaws they were supposed to overcome. In terms of power, it could be said that Alien had been rather skilled. When it came to awakening level, he wasn't even mid-tier. Dallion could only imagine the number of inner demons and lessons left unlearned. No wonder most mages were in such a state.

The saddest thing was that looking at Alien, he knew it as well. The man remained standing, barely keeping himself from shivering in anger. If one would guess, he was angry at the world just as much as he was at anyone else.

"He's better with magic around," Katka said apologetically. "I won't lie. It was a tough few years, but it got a lot better afterwards. Illusions help a lot."

How things had changed. Back in the awakened world, mages were the cream of the crop. By the look of things here, they were at the bottom of the food chain.

"I'm not here to kill you, Alien," Dallion repeated. "I need your help."

"My help?" For a moment, the mage remained perfectly still, then burst out laughing as if he'd heard the most absurd thing possible. The emotions emanating from him were a complete mess, but at least Dallion could tell that they were genuine.

"What can a wreck like me teach the world conqueror?" The man tilted to one side. "I've nothing you don't have. I couldn't even stop you after a decade of—"

"Magic," Dallion interrupted. "I want you to teach me magic. I want you to get me back there."

Alien's expression abruptly changed.

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"You want to go back?" he asked, caution emanating from his very being.

"Yes," Dallion nodded.

From past experience, one would expect the mage to flat out refuse or to start bargaining.

Outside, the sounds of a car were heard. It was impressive that someone had arrived at the scene in such a record amount of time. Having a power cable disrupted in this part of town tended to do that. In all honesty, Dallion hadn't bothered to concern himself with the consequences of his actions.

"I'll go start the generator," Alien said, turning towards the door. "It'll be faster than waiting." He gave Dallion a brief glance. "Coming?"

“Go with him.” Katka formed the words only with her lips. If it was an act, Dallion had to give them credit for the efforts. As the saying went, if they were this good, they deserved to get him in a trap.

As the two went down into the basement, it was remarkable how clean the walls were. If one didn’t know better, they would almost say that the real living spaces were below and everything above was just for decoration.

“Open this,” Alien said once they reached a massive iron door with a wheel handle.

Dallion gave him a questioning glance.

“I’m not strong enough when the power is down.”

One of Dallion’s instances touched the wheel. Nothing bad happened. It was almost refreshing not being taken into a trap.

Putting in some force, he turned the wheel, then pulled the door to the side. The inside could be described as a typical garage setting, complete with lots of heavy tools, two workbenches, and blueprints on the walls. To the uninitiated, the blueprints would look like art designs or constellations. Those in the know would immediately recognize them as magic symbols.

“I started this when I first got back,” Alien lazily went to the generator. It was one of those gas ones that could provide power for hours. Stacked next to it were close to a dozen metal containers of fuel. “Fill it up.”

“Heavy duty.” Dallion did so, picking up one of the fuel containers while the mage removed the cap from the generator. “Aren’t you worried about fumes?”

“Won’t matter once I get power.”

Not an ideal answer, but with three instances, Dallion decided to take the chance. Even so, he always kept one by the exit.

Once a full container of fuel filled the generator tank, Alien started it. The noise was bad enough to make Dallion’s ears bleed, but soon enough, the single bulb connected to the generator lit up.

Seeing that, the mage reached to an open socket and before Dallion’s very eyes pulled out a thread of electricity. The sight was surreal, much in contrast to the dark, cramped surrounding of the basement—like pulling out a thread of light from a swamp.

Not one to bother with explanations, Alien kept pulling it, drawing a series of symbols in the air. Just as in the awakened world, there were safeguards and dummy symbols preventing Dallion from learning the specifics of the spell. From what he could make out, there was a portal component, though. After another few seconds, there was no longer any doubt.

MAGIC AWAKENING

A purple rectangle appeared before Dallion’s eyes. It took him considerably longer to find that the rest of reality had somehow disappeared, leaving him and Alien in a blank canvas.

“Give it some time,” the former archmage said. In this environment, his appearance had changed as well. No longer was he the skinny, scruffy person in the basement, but a confident, well-kept man in an expensive, yet casual suit. “Electricity is slower than proper magic.”

Threads of magic became visible, spreading from the man’s feet, creating a floor. Trickling like water they continued in all directions, changing the whiteness around them into reality: fine wooden floors, a tended garden beyond it, the start of a lake, and an evening sky in which a constant aurora borealis could be seen.

YOU ARE LEVEL ???

A purple rectangle emerged above Alien.

Your destiny has been set.

Looking at it sent a shiver down Dallion’s spine.

“Depressing, isn’t it?” Alien asked, in a calm, accepting tone. “Took me years to come to terms with it. Here our destinies are set.”

“This is your personal realm,” Dallion said.

“No. It’s an image of it. You can say it’s an image of what your realm used to be. You can look, enjoy, but never change a thing.” Alien drew a symbol in the air, causing a lightning bolt to form.

Without delay, Dallion leaped to the side, combat splitting again. All of his instances rolled out of danger. His instinct was to counterattack, stopping the mage from continuing with another spell. And so, he did, rushing forward, then knocking Alien down with a low sweeping kick.

COMBAT INITIATED

MINOR STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 10%

Two red rectangles emerged.

Alien’s hands and fingers moved wildly, casting several aether barriers between him and Dallion.

Keeping the momentum, Dallion continued with the multi-attack, shattering them one after the other like thin glass.

“Stop!” Alien shouted as he managed to cast a flight spell onto himself. “Look at the garden!”

Blobs of fear grew within the man’s body, reaching the size of oranges.

Using one of his instances, Dallion took a risk and turned around. To his surprise, the garden remained completely unchanged. Not even a blade of grass was bent, as if nothing had happened at all.

“It never changes,” Alien explained. “Nothing changes.” He cast another bolt of lightning at the garden. It struck its target with a blinding flash, yet did nothing else.

Slowly, Dallion relaxed his posture. He didn’t stop combat splitting, though.

“It’s like a ROM world, constantly reminding me what could have been. It’s not a personal realm, just a copy.”

It was impossible to say whether he was just coping with the situation or there was a deeper reason for it. On the other hand, he had still managed to get a glimpse of it.

“Lux,” Dallion said, waiting for something to appear. To little surprise, the firebird didn’t materialize. “I guess you can’t summon anything, either.”

“No.” Alien cautiously floated down. “With enough magic, I can recreate almost anything, but never the real thing.” His fingers moved about again. A copy of him emerged. Even in his current state, Dallion was able to see the magic threads flowing through it.

“An echo.”

“The embodiment of a thought,” Alien explained. “It took me a while to make the first one, then half that much to figure out how to place it within someone. They’re like light-bulbs—burning out every few years. Replacing them is a pain.”

“And you had to do all that just to kill me.” Dallion shook his head.

“After what you did in the Academy, how was I supposed to react?” The man snapped, losing his composure in part. “I thought you’d kill me. But that wasn’t the only reason.”

“Oh?”

“Why do you think we’re having this conversation here? The commotion you made getting to me has put me back on their radar. It won’t be long before they come for all of us.”

“They?” Dallion smirked. This sounded just like the paranoia a former mage would come up with.

“Why do you think it’s so difficult to find anyone from that world? There must be hundreds of us right now, probably more.”

“And most of them don’t remember a thing.”

“Yes. They are in control now.” The blobs of fear within the mage grew larger.

“What’s better than keeping your powers, but forgetting the reason you’re not supposed to abuse them?”

Fear always clouded one's judgment, making them see things that didn't exist. Alien was convinced in his words beyond a doubt. In this fake personal realm, the degree of that fear was made visible. Could it be valid? The mage had put in a lot of effort to protect himself from the entire world and everyone in it. It seemed absurd, but as the saying went, just because someone was paranoid didn't mean someone wasn't out to get him.

"It's been like that for centuries," Alien continued. "You just have to be awakened to notice. They're everywhere, watching and killing anyone who attracts too much attention."

With the current amount of emotions emanating from the mage, Dallion knew that it was hopeless to try and convince him with logic. The man had come to his conclusions and nothing could shake those convictions, at least as long as he was in his current state.

"Why didn't you go back?" Dallion asked. "With spellcraft and enough electricity, it should be easy."

The mage scowled at him.

"You think I didn't try? Why do you think Katka is here? There's no way out of this world without the Moons and they aren't in the mood for gifts. It took me a lot to make a portal, and the only place I could get to was here."

Dallion's heart sank. After witnessing the realm and Alien's abilities, he held on to the hope that going back could be a lot easier than it seemed. Now, it turned out that wasn't the case.

"Teach me spellcasting and maybe we can pull it off."

"Just like that?" Alien smirked. "There are five mages as far as I know. One of them is crap, two are in hiding, and the third doesn't want to have anything to do with me." By the sound of things, he didn't put stock in Katka's abilities. "I've spent years trying to boost the portal with Katka and I can't even get into a minor world. Why should you be any different?"

"I'm the last Architect," Dallion said.

The blobs of fear within Alien broke down, replaced by clusters of doubt and grains of awe

"You?" he asked, his expression shifting between mockery and hope. "No shit."

"No shit." Dallion nodded. "So, willing to try again with three people this time?"

There was a lot of bad blood between them. Back in the other world, there were times in which Dallion seriously considered going against his interest knowing that Alien would end up worse off. The feeling was clearly mutual. If the "zombies" in the city were just acting on instructions to attack any awakened within the city, Alien's shotgun greeting showed he'd prefer Dallion dead than alive. Yet, as fate would have it, the mage's desire to return to the awakened world was almost as great as Dallion's himself. After all, there were no eternal enemies, just eternal interests.

Training started from the basics. It was pathetic for someone with a magic trait of over a hundred to focus on extracting magic threads again, and fail at it. But Dallion gritted his teeth and tried to

follow Alien's instructions as best he could. To his surprise, the mage turned out to be a rather good teacher. Many of his mannerisms and comments had a bit of Adzorg in them, though without the humor and encouragement.

Time moved on, as the single moment within the personal realm stretched to infinity. For days Dallion tried to pick up a lightning thread. Unlike magic, they snapped easily and burned to touch. Several times, Dallion tried getting a large enough shock in the hopes it would spontaneously trigger his spellcasting ability, but with no result.

The more Dallion tried, the more Alien's emotions changed. At first, there was glee accompanied with vindication. After a while, it started to wear off. It seemed that observing others' misery wasn't a permanent means to improve the mage's own mood. Had it been like that in the awakened world? So many decades, and all that time, he'd survived on negative emotions.

"Just stop," Alien said on the fourth day. "You're not getting it."

"I see the threads," Dallion countered. Even in a realm, he felt different from in the awakened world. For one thing, he needed to sleep at least five hours per night. "I just need to get the hang of it."

"If you can't get that by now, how will you do the complicated stuff?"

Instead of an answer, Dallion reached for a thread, making it snap in his attempt to pull it out. He felt so close, and yet so far away. Anger bubbled within him. There was a time when he would have exploded. Experience had taught him how to relax quickly, even if it didn't feel pleasant.

"Why did you betray Adzorg?" he changed the subject.

"Huh?"

"In the other world," Dallion clarified. "You'd have been better off with him."

"If you're talking shit, let's just end this and—"

"Was there a reason?" Dallion used his music skills. This time, the subtleness with which he did so, made them attach to the mage.

Alien paused, looking at the lake for several seconds. The calm surface was rippling as it had been for the last few days—seemingly real, but also like a recording playing on loop.

"Jeremy discovered me," he said. "Less than a month after his awakening. I wasn't a big shot. My parents weren't even awakened. When I first emerged from my level one room, I knew nothing. I was confused as hell, and my local memories told me nothing. Then, he appeared—the greatest being I had seen—and took me under his wing."

"You never were Adzorg's disciple..." Dallion could see it now. Alien never had a chance. In such a state of confusion a person would be impressed by a single-

level awakened. There was no way he'd feel differently upon seeing Jeremy in all his glory. "Was it the real him or the echo?"

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"He was real." Alien sat down on the grass. "He told me everything about awakened, mages, and enough of the world that I could make sense of things. Then he put a Moonstone in my realm." A blob of pain emerged in the mage's head. "When I didn't die, he told me I was special and told me he'll find me a teacher to make me great."

"We all saw how that turned out."

"I was never meant to face the emperor. You think you had a raw deal, but you were lucky. You didn't have your future sealed off. I did. Because of what I was, the only way I could progress was through magic. All my levels I gained from shrines and artifacts. The trials were humiliating. I wasn't even close to completing a single one. Also, it wasn't like the old man cared."

"He did." Dallion forced the truth a bit thanks to his music skills. "I saw a fragment of his memories."

"He, too, was playing the role Jeremy created for him. When you're taught by a puppet, the best thing you could do is move closer to the puppeteer."

You really must have had two messed up lives, Dallion thought. His personal observation was that only people with issues were sent to the other world. It didn't help that Jeremy had started using him as his personal Moonstone piggy bank since childhood.

"Have you been in touch with him? Jeremy I mean?"

Alien gave Dallion a look, as if he had spilled yogurt all over his clothes.

"What if you zap me?" Dallion asked.

"Say what?"

"Hit me with a lightning bolt."

"Not that it won't make me happy, but this isn't the awakened world. You won't get your powers sealed. If you die in here, you'll get a heart attack out there, or at least some serious brain damage."

An air of unease surrounded Dallion.

"Talking from experience?"

"I told you there are people after me. They didn't just stop because I asked."

That wasn't good. Normally, Dallion would use his guard skills to leave the realm right away. Sadly, there was no telling if he'd have another opportunity such as this. As long as Alien wanted to escape this world, he'd be more inclined to be careful than any other mage in the world.

"Just don't kill me."

"You're really serious?" The mage stood back up.

"The standard method isn't getting anywhere, so—"

Before Dallion could finish his sentence, Alien cast a lightning bolt and pierced Dallion's shoulder.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 75%

You bastard, Dallion thought as the red rectangle emerged before his eyes. Alien was a lot faster in his personal realm than in the real world.

"You better hope that..." Dallion's vision blurred. The strength of the attack combined with the built-up fatigue made it difficult to remain conscious. Reaching out in front of him, he tried to grab onto something, anything, only to have the red rectangle shatter to dust.

When Dallion opened his eyes next, Alien was gone. However, Euryale was there.

"You did something stupid again, didn't you?" she asked, the snakes on her head moving gently in the breeze.

Dallion's immediate reaction was to look around and check whether he hadn't been transported to the awakened world. Alas, it was the same fake realm Alien had brought him into thanks to his power generator.

"Was it worth it?" The gorgon turned towards him.

Anything that will get me to you is worth it. "I got to see you." Dallion smiled.

"There's that." The note of sadness in her voice was visible. "Is this where you live?"

The house in Alien's realm was a mix between a modern wooden house and an expensive lake retreat. It was okay, though not what Dallion would consider his dream house. Then again, Alien was probably a lot younger when he had first created it. In the awakened world plumbing and electricity was considered a luxury, or a curse based on who one asked.

"No. It belongs to someone else." Part of Dallion wanted to risk running up to the gorgon and embracing her. The only reason he didn't was the fear that might end the dream and he wanted to talk to her a bit before it did. "I met Alien and Katka."

Several dozen of Eury's snakes straightened.

“It’s okay,” Dallion quickly added. “Everything’s fine. They...” he paused. “Mages aren’t such a big deal here.”

The gorgon relaxed a bit.

“They’re teaching me magic... again. If everything goes well, I might be back within a few days.”

“A few days...” the gorgon repeated. “I went to visit Gloria last week. Dallion’s six years old now.”

“Six years?”

That was a lot. Time dilation between the worlds was increasing. From Dallion’s perspective, only a few months had passed, but in the other world...

“They were polite to let me attend the birthday, but confused,” Eury went on. “All except little Dallion.”

Little Dallion. That was the child that could have been Dallion’s own son, if things with Gloria had turned out differently.

“I gave him a gift from the Architect. He enjoyed it, but I don’t think even he believed me.”

“How are Gloria and Falkner?”

“They’re well. The world doesn’t have overseers anymore, so they’re ordinary nobles, just as Veil used to be.”

“Used to be?”

“He’s a hunter now. It suits him a lot better. I even offered to train him, but he preferred to do it on his own.”

“Yeah. That sounds like Veil.”

“What about you?”

“I’m doing everything I can to get—”

“How are you?”

The question caught Dallion by surprise. The whole time he was so focused on tracking down leads that would get him to the awakened world that he hadn’t bothered to give his state much thought. It all just seemed so temporary—a set of hoops he had to jump through until returning to Euryale. In many ways, he was living like Jiroh had.

“There are still things I need to get used to,” he said. “Few of the awakened remember about that world, and all that do seem to be in hiding. Alien’s convinced that people are after him. I doubt it’s true.”

All of a sudden, the gorgon’s expression changed.

“It’s fine.” Dallion laughed. “He’s just being him. There’s nothing to worry about. Don’t worry.”

“You have something on your hand.” Euryale pointed.

Dallion looked down. There was a thin, green, growth on his left thumb. Like a string, it waved in the wind, continuing into the distance. Strange that he had never noticed it before. The strange thing was that it wasn’t a magic thread, at least not entirely. It resembled a music thread.

When Dallion reached out and plucked it out of his thumb, everything around him vanished.

Chapter 980: Dallion's Strings

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Present day, present time...

Another message arrived.

Keep listening to my Spotify. I’ll come to you.

Dallion looked at his computer. The memory was of a few months ago—the precise day that Atol had responded to his mail. The chances of finding her were one in thousands. He had definitely lucked out.

Something wasn’t quite right, though. The letters in the message looked different from what he remembered. It was almost as if several of them were vibrating.

Dallion closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. The letters were still vibrating when he opened them again. It wasn’t random, either, but a series of rhythmic patterns, almost as if they were trying to create a sound. No, they were creating a sound, just not one that anyone could hear with ears. Waves were waves after all.

A sharp pain pierced Dallion’s elbow, as if a lightning bolt had pierced his arm.

“Damnit!” he jumped back.

Get used to it! a female voice said. It sounded sort of familiar, but Dallion couldn’t place it right now.

That was strange. Back when he had received the message Dallion wasn’t able to talk to guardians. Thinking about it, he had lost all of his awakened powers. Was he misremembering? Or maybe the memory had merged with the skills he currently possessed. Magic was the trait of exceptions, after all, even the magic of Earth.

“Who are you?” Dallion asked, but no answer came.

The pain in his elbow quickly faded, which was nice. It remained unclear what had caused it, though. One thing he was sure of was that it resembled the experience that had sent him to the medical center not long ago.

Wake up, he told himself, but the memory refused to disappear, keeping him in his dorm room.

Without thinking, Dallion went back to the sequence of events that had occurred before. Opening Spotify, he found Atol's songs and started listening. There were plenty of music strands within the recordings, but nothing Dallion felt threatened by. After Dallion's conversation with his roommate, the new song finally appeared. The name of the single was Within the Seventh Sphere—potentially something connected with the seven Moons, though by no means definite. Immediately, Dallion started listening.

Unlike all the previous songs, this one had no lyrics, just a three-minute instrumental. That didn't stop it from having a bouquet of emotions tied in. On the surface, the usual joy and cheer were present, yet hidden underneath were more sinister threads. Dallion could clearly recognize depression, fear, and sadness, along with two strands of overconfidence.

You're trying to fight me? He wondered. The effects weren't strong. Anyone capable of noticing them would clearly ignore them without any effort on his own. Nonetheless, Dallion chose to hum a tune to counter the threads. To his surprise, the attempt failed.

Huh? He thought. That's not how it happened. Dallion was certain that he had countered all the threads. And yet, he could see the obvious. Thin strands of sound connected to him, giving him a sense of accomplishment. That wasn't all. He could see a thread of hope within the bouquet as well. As the instrumental continued, it urged Dallion to think of Atol as his friend—someone just like him, who'd no doubt be of significant help.

The memory froze.

No, Dallion thought. He still couldn't accept it, even if the proof was right there in front of his eyes. All this time, he considered himself lucky, convincing Atol to stick around and help him achieve his impossible goal. The truth was that she had convinced him of it. Thinking back, he wouldn't be surprised if she had set her net with her first reply. It was ever so subtle, just like something Dallion's great-grandmother would do; sound hidden in letters, subtly nudging him to listen to the songs, which nudged him even more.

"Red Atol?" Dallion asked. He was in the parking lot now, looking at the woman in her muscle car.

She nodded.

"Red Moon, red card—muscle car," Dallion said.

"Just a car I got." She tried using music again, and Dallion snapped his fingers, but the strands remained intact, providing him a new boost of dopamine on

contact. A false sense of confidence surrounded Dallion, making him feel as if he were in control.

“How did you find me?” he asked.

“Your patreon account. I asked a few people for a few favors. I can be very convincing.”

“I bet.” Even at this level, music skills were capable of convincing anyone of anything. They wouldn’t work on another former awakened, but Earth was full of non-awakened with no ability to resist. “Thanks for coming. I didn’t think—”

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The woman raised a finger.

“Let’s go somewhere first.”

The somewhere turned out to be nowhere in particular. There didn’t seem to be any plan to it. The woman only wanted to be in a place away from buildings and other people. After she found a spot that met the criteria, she pulled up to the side of the road and stopped the car.

Dallion used the map on his laptop to check his current location, then closed it again.

“So, you’re really from there?” The woman turned to him.

“Yep. Part of the Tamin Empire.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

Of course it wouldn’t. Dallion was incapable of seeing it at the time, but he did now. Atol had no memory of the other world. Everything she said was in reaction to him, and what wasn’t was someone else’s story. It had to be real, complete with the emotions that came as she spoke, but those two were rehearsed. The real memory’s owner was elsewhere. The one who had come to Dallion was one of the people Alien was so terrified of—the group of awakened that controlled the world.

No wonder she managed to get everything so fast. It wasn’t just a matter of using music skills to convince someone. That also was a part—one substantial enough to fool Dallion into believing, that was all. It was no coincidence that he had found her—her purpose was to be found, then stay close to awakened that had their memories intact.

Now her initial question made a lot more sense. “Mage or domain ruler” That was the first thing she had asked. The sad truth was that she was assessing him.

Why did I ever think that an awakened would drop everything and get a job at my college just to help? Dallion wondered.

Dallion hadn’t offered anything of the sort, and he had believed Atol’s story. If there had been something specific he could help out with, he’d definitely have done so. He’d definitely assist online, and possibly even go to visit once or twice per semester, but he’d never put his life and his own goals on hold.

You really got me good, didn’t you? Dallion thought.

It had been more than convenient for her to have a lead, one that convinced Dallion to ignore the one he himself had. In his defense, going to Alien proved to be just as welcoming as he had imagined.

Now that he looked at the whole Architect incident, he understood the violent reaction he'd received. The deputy marshal and his wife knew exactly what was going on. It was natural that they would aim to kill. Everything was all a show of force between both parties. The awakened organization, whatever it was called, had made it clear they could reach him. On his part, the Architect had illustrated that they didn't have what it took to defeat him. That's why he had made a point that he wanted to remain isolated from everyone else; a sort of "don't mess with me and I won't mess with you" deal. Dallion had completely missed it.

The memory shifted, bringing him to the gas station Atol had stopped in on the way to Centennial. That, too, had been planned. The people who the woman worked for knew about the protective perimeter Alien had put up. Dallion had been used to set it off.

A town full of echo zombies and you never got in trouble... Dallion shook his head. Strength had made him sloppy. Relying on his restored skills and abilities, he had let himself be used. His latest actions had rendered Alien completely defenseless. With his illusion defenses down, even a low level awakened could handle him. No doubt that's what was in the cards. Atol likely wouldn't risk using music skills on Dallion now that he had regained the ability, but there were other ways.

There could be awakened among the technicians of the electric company, the police that would arrive at the site, or any number of bureaucrats gone there to "oversee" matters. They were going to oversee things alright, but not the things they claimed they would.

The world was a very different place for the awakened. An organization had crept up, subtly controlling all matters that interested them. Dallion had observed the same in the world of furies. There, the soft power was a library, but they too acted in the exact same fashion. It was stupid to think that it would be different in any of the other worlds.

You're good, Dallion thought. You're really, really good.

If he wasn't fortunate enough to be an architect, he'd have already lost. No one could have foreseen that Felygn would allow him to keep his empathy skills. They wouldn't have imagined he'd have the ability to relearn skills so quickly, either.

"Hold on." Atol approached in the memory, tossing him a can of soda. "Aren't you curious what happened in there?"

Dallion frowned.

"I'm not in the mood—"

"When I tried to convince him to have the gum for free, a lamp next to him flickered. The man quickly grabbed his phone and dialed a single number. I've

never seen so much fear emanating from anyone. When I used my music skills to calm him down, the lamp exploded.”

There could be no doubt that a lot more had happened. Dallion didn’t care, though. There was one thing he needed to check and for that, he didn’t need to step inside. Instead, Dallion smashed the cheap glowing sign at the door and reached in to grab the electric current.

“Got you,” Dallion whispered. The current felt solid, though slippery. Quickly he pulled it, drawing the symbols of a two-circle spell in the air.

DALLION DARUDE

TRAITS:

AWAKENING

BODY

MIND

REACTION

PERCEPTION

EMPATHY

MAGIC

SKILLS

GUARD

ATTACK

ATHLETICS

ACROBATICS

SCHOLAR

MUSIC

SPELLCRAFT

A purple rectangle emerged in front of him, ending the memory fragment.

Once again, Dallion was back in Alien’s realm. The rectangle, though, had come with him.

Two skills? He wondered.

He had no idea what had caused him to re-learn his scholar skills. Possibly there was a link between spellcraft and that? Either way, it was only to his benefit. The important thing was that he had finally learned magic. It seemed that his pain theory was correct. That posted questions about how he’d learn the crafting skills. Hopefully, he wouldn’t have to be hit with a frying pan to get an understanding of metals.

“Look at that.” Allien approached. “You survived.” He looked at the purple rectangle, then back at Dallion. “I hate you.”

“I know.” Dallion stood up. He didn’t feel any pain, nor did he feel unwell, either. Lux must have worked on overdrive, for he felt perfectly fit. Just to make sure, Dallion cast another two-circle spell.

His health was full.

“All traits and six fucking skills,” Alien grumbled.

“How many do you have?” Dallion couldn’t help but feel curious.

“Three,” the mage grumbled. Blobs of envy formed within him, yet he was telling the truth.

“Well, I’m afraid you’ll hate me even more in a bit,” Dallion said with a stern expression.

“What else? You brought a dragon?” Alien smirked.

“The organization of amnesia awakened you told me about... I’ve led them straight here.”