

## Leveling up 891

Chapter 891: Open Challenge

**Euryale has created the Land of FLANKER Level 1 on your behalf.**

**A Blade Spider has been designated as the lands guardian.**

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

Two rectangles flashed before Dallion. Euryale had also joined into the action. Considering that she had been fighting the Azures considerably longer, that was unsurprising. The only thing she lacked was Dallions control of water and, by the looks of it, the ability to modify the shape of her domains. Because of their relationship, though, she didnt have to.

Dallion quickly took control of the new domain, leveling it up to a town, then creating a new landmass in the sea. All the time, he was mindful of the number of inhabitants on the move. Even with the battle mage gone, he had lost close to ten thousand. He could only speculate that the Azures losses were greater. Approximately a quarter of the initial fleet had been destroyedbut nowhere nearly enough for them to go on retreat.

Meanwhile, Grym was still engaged in a battle with Pan. The power of the two emperors seemed to be evenly matched, despite the limitations of the puppet. A thin layer of aether had covered the humans body, providing an almost perfect protection, but more importantly, it had also enabled him to cast a few spells.

Need help, Pan? Dallion asked through his realms connection.

Dont worry about the details, the copyette replied. Focus on the big picture.

*Youre the main piece of the big picture.*

Thanks to his two new temporary domains, Dallion had managed to cut off part of the battlefield. The ships closest to the coast were being successfully overrun by gorgon troops, who kept petrifying things on their way. Even so, the ballista fire kept on killing dozens at every strike.

Thank the Moons there was only one battle mage, Dallion whispered as he looked at the entire battlefield from the sky.

From such a distance, it seemed almost unreal, like a game taking place in real time. His perception trait let him see every corner of it in great detail. It was also there that he came to the inevitable conclusion that the nymph empress wasnt putting any real effort into it. There could be no doubt that she wanted to retrieve her sister, and she would have liked to gain a foothold in that part of the continent, but it didnt seem like a must. Other than the massive size of her fleet, there was no strategy. The ships were more or less evenly spread out, occasionally clustered in small groups, with no overall structure. It was as if the Azures were so confident in their control of water that they cared about little else.

*She never cared about the troops*

, Dallion thought.

No, Giaccia agreed from her realm. They aren't her troops and even if they were, things would hardly be different. She has a goal in mind, same as before. Until she reaches it, no price is too high.

There was no denying that. Having one's entire race banished for the sake of potential world conquest was a heavy price, but Tiallia had paid it gladly, and now had a good chance at success. The only person in her way was the Tamin emperor, who still refused to set foot out of his dazzling seat of power, leaving others to fight his battles for him. So far it had worked, but with the collapse of the Alliance he'd have to take the active part and there was no guarantee he was up to it.

Dallion raised a new set of mountains in his domains, providing cover to his forces. With the number of them crossing the improvement threshold, he doubled the domain in size, trapping a dozen more ships on enemy land.

Of greater concern was a small cluster of ships to the side of the main conflict. Whoever was leading them seemed more competent than the rest, focusing on achieving landfall instead of aimlessly bombarding the gorgon forces with ballista bolts. Dallion immediately erected a few sets of walls at that part of the city and put Veil in charge of organizing the local defense. For the moment, there was no reason for Dallion to deal with matters personally.

Adzorg, how much do you think the emperor knows? he asked.

About you, dear boy? There was an unmistakable streak of bitterness in the mages voice.

*About the war.*

*Oh. Well, it's difficult to tell. There haven't been messengers running around the corridors of the palace, if that's what you mean. I expect that he's aware of the Alliance's fate. That's hardly an event that could be kept secret. As far as I know, none of the archdukes have fallen, so things must be alright on that front.*

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*Just as it was before Dreuds betrayal*

*In all honesty, nothing in the capital has changed. People are still focusing on local issues, leaving the rest of the world to well, the rest of the world.*

*You're a far greater topic of discussion. Someone I suspect an Elazni has put out the rumor that you might be made archduke of the east. There's also the usual discussion about the line of succession. With the emperor still being a bachelor and all, people are considering whether it would be appropriate for him to take a wife from the branch families.*

The notion made Dallion shiver.

*A few are even suggesting that it might be a good idea for the emperor to marry the nymph empress.*

You must be kidding. Dallion couldn't keep himself from saying.

*I agree, dear boy, but you must look at it from a different point of view. Hes powerful, shes powerful, hes male, shes female. In the minds of some, thats more than enough. It wouldnt be the first time warring sides have made up. The history tomes are full of such examples.*

If it were anyone else, maybe such a union would be possible. However, Tiallia was an otherworlder with the aims of becoming a Moon. If there ever was a marriage, it would be followed by the inexplicable death of Emperor Tamin, at which point she would have achieved her goal. The emperor likely knew that.

*What about the Order of the Seven Moons?*

*Im afraid youre the expert on that matter. They continue to be persona non grata. I doubt things will change during the current emperors lifetime.*

Theyre what? Dallion blinked.

*Persona non grata. Its a phrase that means unwelcome.*

Dallion knew perfectly well what it meant, just as he knew that it had no place in this world.

*It was invented by the first Tamin emperor after outcasting one of his close friends at the time. Supposedly, it was very popular three centuries ago. Nowadays, its mostly old academics such as myself that use it.*

*I see. Well, tell me if you hear anything interesting.*

You used to have a higher opinion of me, dear boy. Adzorg sighed.

The war kept raging on. As Dallions network of domains slowly grew, so did the number of casualties. Despite all his efforts, coming into contact with the enemy led to many killed, and even Euryale wasnt able to prevent that. A few points of intense fighting formed near the citys walls, but didnt last long. Dallion had full control of the land and the moment they ventured into the citys domain, he could make full use of it, as could Veil.

Move everyone back, Pan told Dallion out of nowhere.

Why? Dallion focused on the flagship again.

As a result of the clashes between the two, there was nothing left of the ship other than its hull. Every piece of decking had been utterly destroyed and evaporated. Whatever crew and troops had been there were either dead or fled. Only two entities remained: Grym and a host of humans that were all Pan.

*Im going to cast a destructive spell and I dont want to get the Moons pissed by killing our own.*

The casual tone of the request was in huge contrast with the consequences of the spell. While the nymphs were the race favored by Galatea, it had been said that the copyettes had the most destructive spells thanks to their high mind trait.

Not knowing what to expect, Dallion didnt even ask his troops to retreat, forcefully pulling the landmasses away from the flagship, all the way back to the coast.

What are you doing? Euryale shouted. We have the momentum. If we lost it, we

The gorgon wasn't able to finish her sentence. A massive ball of cyan appeared just above the Azures flagship. Strands of purple circled it like ribbons on a bowling ball. The symbols on them were unlike anything Dallion had seen. Unlike the spell conventions he was familiar with, they composed one single pattern containing thousands of magic instructions along each magic thread. As a mage, Dallion couldn't help but admire the beauty of it all. At the same time, he doubted that Pan had asked for a troop withdrawal due to the spells aesthetic qualities.

A shattering pop filled the air, causing millions to cover their ears on reflex. Initially, nothing else seemed to have occurred, but as everyone familiar with magic knew: where spells were involved, the laws of nature were merely guidelines. In this case, the sound of the spell preempted its other effects.

The blast followed seconds later. The sphere ballooned to ten times its size. Like a white sun, it consumed the flagship, then proceeded to engulf the ocean beneath it. A feeling of dread emanated from anyone looking, as it steadily kept on growing to the point that it almost reached the coast itself.

Mega spell, Dallion thought. He had witnessed the stuff of legendsthe massive destructive power that world conquerors of the past had used while fighting. Larger than the effect of an individual Tamin rocket, it remained static for several seconds more, as if hesitating whether to go forward, then slowly started receding. The area that it occupied remained empty, as if even water was afraid to venture there out of fear it would be vaporized. A sphere of nothingness formed around the glowing center, remaining undisturbed for several seconds, until the ocean abruptly chose to pour in, causing massive waves to fill the entire bay.

Well, you don't see that every day, Adzorg said, making the understatement of the year. Even after everything he'd been through in recent months, Dallion had to agree.

The ball of incandescent light kept on shrinking until it was no more. All the ships that had been within it were gone. The flagships husk was non-existent, although there were a few things that were left behind.

Not bad, Grym said as he floated in the air. Any armor and clothes had been melted off his body, leaving him stark naked. Yet, the layer of magic covering him had managed to fend off the effects of the copyettes spell.

Floating fifty feet away, a slime shifted form, regaining its clothed human appearance.

You've grown rusty, Grym continued. According to the sagas, that spell had swallowed up entire kingdoms.

One has to factor in more than power when casting a spell, the copyette replied. Though I'm always happy for an encore.

I'm sure you are. Grym was no longer looking at him, diverting his attention to Dallion. I bet you're feeling very smug right now. You saved your puny city, broke my puppets and turned my sister against me.

New layers of purple light emerged onto the humans body, creating a set of clothes.

You cant even comprehend the mistake you made. Ill give you this battle, but itll be your last win. So far, you were just a minor irritant that my puppet obsessed on. Now, you have my attentionyou and the so-called Tamin Emperor.

Grym flicked his fingers. In a single instant, all remaining Azure ships sank into the sea like stones. There was no warning, no flashy effects, just a quick and merciless death of all aboard.

I dont like things that disappoint me. Next time I come for you, Ill do so with my own troops. Enjoy the brief rest youve earned, if youre able. As for you, Gia, your playing around is starting to get bothersome. Keep that in mind.

A portal formed a step away from Grym, then moved through him. Fractions of a second later it was gone, and he along with it.

## Chapter 892: Mage Prison Visit

Victory had many forms. There could be no doubt that the conflict could be considered a victory. The city had survived with what was left of the Alliance. The Azures had lost a massive fleet and their chance to gain a foothold; Dallion had obtained a Moon platinum weapon and gained a valuable ally, and yet he also felt that he had lost.

Everything said about cities turned out to be true: structures could be repaired and rebuilt in a flash; it was the inhabitants that were important, and a lot had been lost today. After summing up the dead and incurably wounded, over a hundred and eight thousand had perished. Most disturbing of all, the survivors didnt seem terribly shaken up by the event. There was no telling how many times they must have gone through this to have gotten used to the brutality.

Dallion had attempted to raise their moods through his music skills, but Euryale had stopped him. According to her, fake bliss was the worst cure in times of war. Better for people to accept what was happening and not rely on dulling methods. Looking at the emotions emanating from the inhabitants of the city, she seemed to be right.

News of the Azures defeat quickly spread throughout the world. The Moon vow given by Adzorg had little effect, for by evening, the imperial palace was informed. The only possible explanation could be that the Order of the Seven Moons had a few copyettes among the enemy troops, or Dallions inhabitants. The chilling notion made him ask that Veil and Pan check through the peopleand itemsto seek out any hidden spies. While everyone in Dallions former cities had personally given him a Moon vow, Alliance had been created by Euryale, who was too focused on their survival to request such. Whatever the reason for the leak, it was likely that there would be a lot more hunters and furies making their way to the new domains. With luck, a few free nobles within the empire might also choose to take his side.

I think Im done, Dallion said, examining Euryales side. All thats left are the effects and those should heal on their own.

I should be mad at you, the gorgon said, her voice twisting in a suggestive manner.

The adrenalin from the battle had made her as flirty as back when they had first gotten together. Truth be told, if it wasnt for the emotions of the survivors, Dallion would have felt the same. Making love was difficult when surrounded by pain and cries. He could easily get rid of that by

putting on a blocker item, but had decided not to. The reasoning was that he, too, should get used to the consequences of war. This time he had won, and at a relatively low price. Next time, things might well be different. Furthermore, since Dallion aimed to conquer the world himself, it was inevitable that there would be a lot more battles such as this, possibly even larger.

Whats wrong? the gorgon asked. Youre doing it again.

Doing what?

Standing here while your mind wanders somewhere else. Of all the people in the world, she was possibly the only one who could notice. It usually follows a major decision.

Dallion remained silent. There were many big decisions he had to make, though he felt one took precedent, overshadowing all the rest.

Theres something that I need to do. He went to the window. Three Moons were in the sky as night made its approach. I wont be long.

You know I can go along, she offered. Veil will handle things here. Theres Hannah too.

I need to do it alone. Dallion fought the internal desire to agree. Part of him wanted her to come along, but that wouldnt be right. He had to do this alone, for the sake of him as well as her. Ill be back soon, I promise.

The snakes on Euryales head twirled with slight annoyance.

Youll owe me one, she said.

That makes a few so far.

Ill hold you to it.

Dallion smiled, then quickly cast a flight spell. A moment later, he darted into the sky.

Smooth, Vihrogon said from his domain.

Shut up, Dallion whispered.

Normally, the flight to his destination would take days. Thats why Dallion didnt go there directly. Instead, he went through his realm network, returning to his small domain in the imperial capital. From there, he immediately left his mansion and flew off in the direction of the mage Academy.

None of the citys barriers or balderers stopped Dallion as he made his way. There was no denying that a lot more of them had cropped up. The emperor and nobles within the city of decadence could very much pretend the outsideworld didnt exist, but they werent stupid. They knew exactly who they were fighting and had taken steps to maintain the illusion they were living in.

Crimson cloud forts circled the outer perimeter of the palace cluster. The war had decreased the number of crimson furies, so they had been pulled back to focus on the capital. Standard forts and battle mages aided the archdukes in their battle now.

Soon enough, the illusion barrier of the Academy came into view. There was a time when the illusion would prevent Dallion from even noticing it. At his current level, it had the opposite effect, glowing in bright purple light.

Is that how you see illusions, Gleam? Dallion flew on. Now he knew why it was so easy for her to determine what was an illusion and what not.

Similar, but different, the shardfly replied. Keep in mind you only see the ones you can see. The powerful ones remain hidden.

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Good to know.

Ignoring the main buildings, Dallion flew on. His main goal was the prison building. Massive golems looked up as he passed by, yet did nothing. In addition to his noble title, he remained an active battle mage. The current archmage was either too scared or too lazy to change the instructions given to the golems. Given that Dallion seldom visited, there probably wasnt any point.

A hundred feet away from the structure, Dallion landed on the ground. As expected, two mages in dark green tunics appeared out of thin air. In the past, this would be the point at which theyd demand his business. Being a noble, however, came with its benefits.

Your grace, one of them bowed. Its an honor. We werent expecting your

I need to check something with a few prisoners, Dallion interrupted in typical noble fashion. Wheres Palag?

There was a moment of silence. Dallion could feel the fear emanating from the mages, despite their best efforts.

Im sorry to say that he didnt make it, the mage said.

That was new. Dallion hadnt heard that particular piece of news. Then again, he was no longer in the know when it came to Academy matters.

How?

The mages looked at each other.

It would help me in the war. Dallion used his music skills to nudge the two in the right direction.

Killed. The water we gave him to drink turned into a water golem and ripped his throat out.

Water golems here?

The prison runes only kept people from getting out. There was no reason to

Dallion gestured to them to stop. He knew perfectly well that it wasnt the nymph empire that had caused this. No spell could make it this far in the capitals domain. His guess would be that the Order of the Seven Moons had orchestrated this or the emperor himself. The exact reason, though, eluded him.

What about Phoil and Raven? he asked. Are they still alive?

Your former classmates. One of the mages couldnt help but smirk. Yes, they are here and in perfect condition. Do you want to see them?

Since Im here, I might as well. Without any further explanations, Dallion continued forward.

Doors opened as he walked without him even having to lift a finger. The benefit of people seen as someone of power was that people fell over themselves to do favors. It wasn't so much that they expected anything in return, but rather the knowledge that they would be punished if they didn't.

The building had expanded quite a bit since Dallion's last visit. Now there were hundreds of cells, all of them barred and mostly occupied. It wouldn't be a stretch to assume that other buildings of that nature had also been added within the Academy. Most of the prisoners were rogue mages, but there also were a few actual azures. Judging by their low magic traits, they amounted to nothing more than foot soldiers.

The wooden door was identical to how he remembered it. In a way, one could call the prisoners lucky, since they got some privacy, at least.

Here we are, your Grace, one of the mages said. Just be sure to close the door before

I know the procedure, Dallion said with a slight hiss, making the mage take a step back.

Opening the door took him to a small closed off room. Closing it revealed a second door. Through it lay the cell he had come to visit.

Dal? a black-haired boy in his early teens said. He had experienced a growth spurt since Dallion's last visit. His eyes, on the other hand, were those of an old man.

Hello, Raven, Dallion said, then turned to the other person in the room, who was leaning against the far side of the wall. Phoel. You've changed.

Talking about change, what happened to you? Don't tell me you're a noble now, he laughed. The polite smile on Dallion's face made him stop. You are?!

A few things have happened since my last visit.

How long ago was that? Phoel asked. The former bully had lost a lot of his weight, though he hadn't gained any muscle, making him a caricature of his former self. Even so, he looked healthy if ill kept. Times been shifty here.

They put you back in a prison item, Dallion said, a note of pity in his voice.

A few centuries, Phoel waved his hand. You lose count.

The first decades are the toughest, Raven agreed. You get used to it afterwards. So, did you fight my brother? he asked eagerly.

Why would you ask? Dallion's suspicions kicked in.

You're here. Why else would you be?

As much as he hated to admit it, that was true.

I did just this morning. The statement got both boys' attention. He tried to take over my domain. I stopped him.

Did you kill him?

No, but there's nothing left to kill. He has a symbiote echo of the nymph empress.



Time seemed to freeze as the prisoners struggled with the statement. Raven, in particular, was highly conflicted on the matter. His brother had used him to try and take down the Academy and get him killed in the process. Because of that, he knew perfectly well what the implications of being puppeted were.

Did you know anything about it? Dallion asked.

Raven shook his head.

I only knew that we were to restore our glorious past and bring forth the Age of the Seventh Moon.

The puppeteers being puppets, Phoel laughed from his side of the room. What a beautiful irony.

That's not Dallion began out of habit, but quickly stopped. So, you never noticed any change in him? he turned back to Raven.

We weren't particularly close. I'm sure that his character wasn't due to his puppet. He always thought he was destined for greatness and fate cheated him out of it.

In what way?

By denying him two of the five traits. It's said that all great rulers in history have had all seven traits. The good ones only had six. A mocking smile formed on the boy's face. And he only had five.

Felt being denied something he was owed, Dallion thought. There was an uncanny resemblance between the description of Grym and all the Stars. They, too, felt they were owed things and had resorted to the seeming power from the Void to obtain it. In Grym's case, he had come into contact with another power, one who had firsthand experience of working with a Star.

What about the Order? Was there a change in their activity?

No. Raven shook his head. They've always been the same, before and after.

Wait, what?! The Order remained in your cities?

Yep, in all of them. It's their way not to take sides and pick up the broken.

Dallion didn't say a thing. The point wasn't so much what the Order had done, but rather that they hadn't been attacked. The nymphs had no issues taking on two major powers at once, and still, the Order of the Seven Moons had remained untouched. Maybe the archbishop was a lot stronger than Dallion had initially thought.

## Chapter 893: Gathering of the Twelve Suns

According to the bestiary that Dallion had obtained years ago, there were a total of seventeen known dragons dead or alive. Upon hearing that they'd be hunting a nest, his immediate thoughts were that he might set off to exterminate Dark's family. Hearing that the location was to the north didn't calm him down much, either. With the world being a globe, there was a chance that the fallen south could end up a lot closer to the imperial capital than one might expect.

Lift the walls, Pierce, Abba said in a loud voice.

Within seconds, the walls that separated the inner sanctum from the uncommon room slid up into the ceiling. The spell integrated within the structure was masterfully crafted, but Dallions thoughts were elsewhere.

Veil, tell Hannah shes in charge, he said through his personal realm.

Your wife wont like that, the overseer replied.

*Tell Eury to got o the nearest monastery of the Order and ask for the offer that was promised.*

*Thats a bit cryptic. Are you in trouble?*

*I dont know yet, but someone is.*

A second layer of walls vanished up into the ceiling, transforming the entire building into one massive chamber. Even so, everyone present knew their place. No one crossed the invisible lines, demoting their status. Occasional shuffling took place as the more senior members moved closed to the center, finding their order within the hierarchy.

You all responded to the call, Atla said, putting an end any whispers that were still taking place. The veterans will know what this means. To everyone else, the Order of the Twelve Suns has been tasked with a dragon hunt.

Eagerness and pride filled the space, emitted by virtually everyone. The emotions were so strong that Dallion felt as if he were stuck inside a ringing church bell.

The Mage Academy made the discovery a few weeks ago, Aba continued. The inner sanctum was made aware back then, but fighting on the fronts made it impossible for any action to be taken. Now, thanks to Bishop Dallion Elazni, who defeated the Azure forces in the far east, weve been granted a window of opportunity.

*Im a bishop now?*

Dallion had rarely heard so many lies stacked in one. For starters, he was never informed of the find. The archmage went out of his way to keep it secret. Also, from a military standpoint, Dallion hadnt achieved a factory, but rather avoided a defeat. He had been on the defensive and is it wasnt for the Alliances remaining troops he would have fled back to the imperial capital with nothing. Finally, he couldnt help but notice that there had been no mention of the Alliances destruction.

The information we have is scant, but weve managed hunts with less, Atla added, ending with a laugh.

A few chuckles followed from other members, though a lot less than Dallion thought thered be.

I wont lie to you. The task is massive. The mages say that the nest holds several dozen dragonlets and young dragons, each of them capable of taking down several fourth-gaters. But thats not all. The reason that the entire Order was called upon was because a grand dragon was also spotted.

I dont like the sound of that, Dallion said to himself.

Just like an idiot to go poking for dragons in the middle of a war, Adzorg agreed with a grumble. If I still were archmage, I'd have put the nest off limits until the nymphs were defeated.

Clearly, the old mage remained convinced of the emperor's infallibility.

The speech went on in a mixture of praise and preparing the participants for the worst. At one point, one of the inner sanctum members made his way to Dallion. The approach was silent and faster than the eye could see. Dallion, though, had become above the average domain ruler.

Wait for the rush, then head for the war room, the person said. He was at least three quarters of a century old, with multiple scars on his face and neck. Even without asking, Dallion could tell that the man was a hunter and one with plenty of experience.

Where's the war room? Dallion whispered back.

Far end. The marble door.

No sooner had he said that, than the man moved away just as quickly as he had approached.

The emperor himself has acknowledged this as the Order's greatest mission! Atlas' voice boomed, spreading threads of enthusiasm through the massive chamber. In typical empath fashion, he wasn't targeting the people directly, but the item guardians of their gear. For that reason, all of you will receive the greatest gift the Twelve Suns have to offer. He pointed in the direction of one of the remaining doors. Today, every member, regardless of rank, will be granted access to the skill awakening shrine! Take as much advantage of it as your skills allow!

If there was any doubt as to the rush it was now gone. Hundreds rushed in the direction indicated, bursting into instances as they did so. The temptation of endless levels shattered the usual decorum, as no one wished to be left out. The only people who remained still were those who had already reached the soft cap.

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Disgraceful, Duchess Elazni muttered, using her music skills to create a circle of great around her. No one, even unwittingly, approached within ten feet of her, even if the majority had no idea why.

Don't miss your cue, dear boy, Adzorg reminded.

Dallion didn't need telling twice, quickly moving away from the main crowd and to the empty section of the building. It took him less than a second to reach the marble door.

Let me in, he told the guardian, noticing that the door had no lock or handle.

Without a word, a locked clut letting the door open a crack.

Stepping inside, Dallion found five people already present. All of them had the distinct appearance of hunters, along with a few others. Of them all, the only one Dallion was remotely familiar with was Astra. The woman had traded her usual fancy outfit for a full set of sky silver.

Close it, the hunter who had approached Dallion earlier said. It's enough that we have to hunt with that rabble.

Clearly not a people person, Dallion thought as he pushed the door shut.

Hi, Dal. Astra offered a smile. I see you've already met the Count, and everyone else, for that matter.

One of the hunters snorted in amusement.

Pleasure. Dallion nodded, glancing at everyone in turn. I thought titles weren't used in the inner sanctum.

The Count is our exception. He's the last of the old guard, and if he's to be believed, the second greatest hunter on the continent.

The second? Dallion asked within his realm.

The emperor's the first, obviously, Adzorg replied.

Obviously, Dallion thought.

Let's get on with it, the Count took his seat at the small marble table in the center of the room. Forget everything you heard out there. We're going after the great dragon. Everything else is for show.

Why gather all other members, then? Dallion took one of the free seats as well.

Time, Astra replied. With the war, we can't spend years chasing the creature. The common and uncommon members will spread out so we can cover a large area. Once they find the nest, it'll be our turn.

Didn't the Academy find that already?

I told you to forget everything you heard out there, the Count hissed. They found something, tried to take it, then ran off once something larger came. They geared up and tried a second time, but the dragons were gone.

That sounded disturbing. For the Shimmering Circle to fail, the dragon had to be very powerful.

In short, they find it, we kill it, then bring the prize to the emperor.

Sounds a bit excessive. The emperor must love his trophies.

Half of the people at the table looked away, two let out a mocking laugh.

Oh, the trophy is worth the effort. For the first time since he'd met him, Dallion thought he saw the Count's lips twist into a grin. A dragon that big is bound to have a Moonstone.

Moonstone? Dallion's heart skipped a beat.

Now, that explained a great many things. Moonstones were a lot rarer than he initially thought. Initially, the mages' trial had left him with the impression that they were rare, but findable resources, no different from artifacts. Since then, he had revised his opinion. All the time and money spent on ruin hunting had only earned him one additional Moonstone. Technically, he could obtain another if he destroyed the awakening shrine of his domain, but he didn't consider doing that even as a last resort.

More than one, if were lucky. For there to be a nest, there have to be two of them. Two great dragons. Itll be a difficult kill, so well have to split up. Youre have the highest magic in the Order, so youll focus on the stronger one. Pierce will deal with the other.

By deal, I assume you mean protect you lot? Dallion clarified.

Whatever works, the Count ignored the question. Whats important is to kill them fast and not let a vortex form. If one does form the man pointed at Dallion youll have to deal with that as well.

Naturally.

From what he could remember, dragons contained so much magic that upon death, part of their energy tore a piece of reality, giving birth to a void copy of the creature complete with skills and memories. If the dragons theyd face were stronger, the hunting party would have to kill them twice: once in their normal form, and once again in whatever form followed.

Theres still some time until the skill leveling is over, so take care of any unfinished business by then. And you. The count gave Dallion a stern look. Gear up.

Sure, Dallion replied. But before that, I have a question. I know Im the newest one here, but are there any songs or records about facing a great dragon?

The silence was absolute. Even the emotions emanating from the people moments ago abruptly stopped.

Not even one?

The Order of the Seven Moons erased all knowledge on the matter. Astra was the one who spoke. We know that thereve been dragon hunts in the past. Thanks to the Academy, we also know that Moonstones are obtained by slaying a great dragon, but other than that she shrugged.

We know that not all past hunts involved mages, so they can be defeated, another hunter added.

Magic only kills if its stronger than the person its facing, Dallion said. For all we know, killing the dragon might turn it into something much stronger.

Which is precisely why the emperor gathered the entire inner sanctum, the Count stressed. All of us are close to a hundred. Well handle the matter. The only question is how many well lose in the process.

Only a hardened hunter could say that. Dallion had suspected something back when access to the skill shrine had been offered. There was no such thing as a free lunch. Back during the War of Inheritance in Weties province, a similar offer had been made to anyone willing to join the army for one side or other.

Once again, I ended up like my grandfather, Dallion thought. Does anyone know how to fight a great dragon?

No, Harp replied. I didnt face any back in my age, and the Order was thorough in erasing all other knowledge. I might have killed one in the hands of my owners and I wouldnt even know.

That sounded rather excessive. With all information on the matter erased from the world, Dallion was heading into the hunt blind. Protecting Abba, not to mention himself, had become a whole lot more difficult.

#### Chapter 894: One Second Honeymoon

With everything else Dallion had faced so far, it was difficult to explain the nervousness he experienced right now. Hed achieved what hed promised, even if after a substantial delay. He knew, thanks to his music skills, the feelings that Euryale had towards him, and still there was that intense moment of uncertainty stuck to the back of his mind.

Was it possible that she recused? Gorgon social norms remained unclear, but a battlefield wedding wasnt on anyones wish list. A tiny voice whispered that he could easily leave it till later. The stone orchid wasnt going to wither, not to mention the victory hed earned put him in a strong enough position to demand he be made an archduke.

Also, going through with this was more than living together. While gorgons and humans were incompatible when it came to children, he knew enough magic to find the exception to the rule. Illusion and transformation magic were more than capable of temporarily turning him into a gorgon or her into a human just enough so that she could conceive.

Maybe its not the right time, Dallion thought, standing in front of the door to Euryales room. He knew that she was there several area guardians had confirmed it. In a way, that made it more difficult.

Back to being an idiot? Vihrogon asked, though without mockery.

Easy for you to say, Dallion whispered.

*You got that right. Its a lot easier for me. Then again, I never got to the point of making a family, and now never will.*

He was right, of course. That was the only big question Dallion needed to answer. No matter what, he decided there'd always be problems in one form or another. The opportunity, however, wouldn't last forever.

*Look, if youre not certain that shes right for you after spending a few centuries together, I dont know what to tell you.*

You dont have to tell me anything. Dallion opened the door without knocking.

Euryale stood in the far end of the room, looking out of a giant window. That had been a new addition created by Dallion. Clad in her sun gold armor, three quarters of the snakes on her head focused on the view outside, while the remaining quarter concentrated on Dallion.

Im back, he said, using the worst opener since the beginning of time.

I know, she replied. I sensed you appear.

I didnt know you could do that. Dallion took a few steps forward. I brought

Stop! she said briskly. I just want to know one thing.

Sure? This was definitely not the way Dallion imagined it. Other than him being way more decisive, he didnt foresee any further hiccups.

Are you absolutely sure about this?

Dallions first reaction was to ask what she was talking about. At the same time, he knew perfectly well just as she knew.

This is different from what I thought it would be, he made his way next to the gorgon.

With all traces of the battle gone, the view was exceptional. One might say it was worthy of the new world capital, if still a bit on the rough side. Gone were the temporary islands, making the bay look twice as wide.

We were just a couple of hunters back then, she said. That's why I never pushed you. I knew how fragile you were and the pressure you were under.

Fragile? Dallion thought.

Gorgon culture, Adzorg chimed in. I thought you'd get used to it by now, dear boy.

When I became the war leader of the Alliance, I thought I could easily take you under my wing. If the emperor had lent you a few months back, I would have. Looking back, maybe it was for the best.

I can agree with that. Although my family wasn't thrilled with the idea at the time.

The gorgon let out a dry chuckle.

Think they will be now? she turned looking at him, face eyes closed.

The heck with them. Right now, only we matter. Dallions decisiveness was back, burning with a passion within him. I want us to be together, he summoned the stone orchid. Even petrified, the object's magic was glowing so brightly it might well have been a flower made of purple light. I wasted so many opportunities before, and I don't plan on wasting this one. We both know that things will be tougher moving on, but I want to face the world along with you.

The snakes on Euryales' head moved about. This was the second time he had offered her the flower, and this time it was definite. Regardless of human customs and traditions, the moment she accepted it, the union would be established and only death could tear them apart.

With speed exceeding Dallions' own. She grabbed the orchid. From his perspective, one moment it was in his hands and the next in hers.

That was only the start. Sensing that it changed hands, the orchid shifted color, glowing in a deep green. The blossoms closed up, forming the stone it was before. Yet, in this case, it was no longer a stone. Dallion could see the energy within it double, then triple. Millions of thread clusters of magic, spark and music, twisted around, merging together into various shapes. The speed and intensity quickly increased to the point that Dallion could no longer follow. In less than a second, the former stone orchid lit up, then faded again hundreds of times, until finally the outer layer cracked, collapsing on itself.

A flutterblade? Dallion asked, astonished at the transformation.

**GOLDEN ARIA**

**Species: ARIA**

**Class: Music**

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**Health: 100%**

**Traits:**

- **BODY 20**
- **MIND 60**
- **PERCEPTION 60**
- **REACTION 60**

- **EMPATHY 10**

- **MAGIC 20**

**Skills:**

- **GUARD**
- **ACROBATICS**
- **MUSIC**
- **ARTS**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **FLIGHT (Species Unique)**
- **SPARK (Species Unique)**

A purple rectangle appeared above the creature for a few moments. It wasn't anything that Dallion had seen or read about before. The only reason he didn't consider it a new species was due to the lack of achievement rectangle.

What is that? Dallion asked as the creature stretched its ribbon-like wings, then flowed through the air to Euryales shoulder.

Our guardian, Euryale replied, extending her arm forward.

The moment the aria received enough space, it wrapped itself around the gorgon's biceps, sinking through the armor until it was no longer seen.

The witness to our true emotions. She moved her arm about as if getting used to the notion. As a race, we tend to keep our emotions bottled inside. The orchids reveal them to the world. My mother this world's mother had to fight and kill the result of hers, though still ended up accepting the union. Guess we know why my local family ended up being so messed up.



That's how the cutlings came into being, Vihrogon reminded Dallion. When other races learned they could feed them on pain and wounds, what better way to transform the witness of emotions into a monster, protecting themselves in the process?

Dallion thought back to his first encounter with the creatures. He had been told how furies and other races used them in battle. As long as they were integrated into something, an orchid could devour thousands of lethal slash wounds, seemingly without cost. Of course, that was until the item had had its fill and transformed into a monster of the wilderness.

So, this is how they are used? He placed his hand on Euryales arm. He could feel a ribbon of warmth wrap part of his fingers. What happens now? he asked.

Now, we wait, she replied.

Wait for what?

The snakes moved about, as she gave him an expectant look without even opening her eyes.

Orchids feed on emotion, she explained. In our case, everything we felt towards each other. Since it had its fill, it'll take a short while for the emotions to build up again. Then Euryale took a blocking ring from around her neck and slid it on her left index finger the night is ours.

Events happened just as she had said they would. For close to an hour, the two kept standing at the window, looking outside. They'd reminisce about the past, laugh at the bright moments they'd been through, and recognize the rough patches, while the emotions within them slowly built up like waves. Then, when Dallion felt they were nearing the limit, he used his domain ruler powers to seal off the window.

It could be said that this was his first honeymoon experience, and it was unlike anything he had experienced before. The passion had reached new levels, as they shifted through dozens of domains all in the length of a single night. Universes blended literally and figuratively, making reality lose hold. During that night nothing in the world mattered—the war, the domains, the political squabbles of nobles, all faded into nothingness to enjoy a single overdue moment stretched to infinity. Then, the next day, the human part of the ceremony took place.

Unlike the gorgon approach, the human part of the wedding—even one as sudden as this—was accompanied by lots of pomp and celebration. Dallion was hesitant initially, but as a domain ruler he could see that his inhabitants needed something to put their mind off the horrors they'd been through.

Veil, who claimed to have the most recent experience as to weddings, transformed Alliance into one enormous festival ground full of reminders of the event. All windows of every structure were changed into hearts, while motifs of Eury and Dallion's lives—separate and together—appeared on every wall and facade. Not to be outdone, Diroh did the same, having the furies shape the clouds in the sky. Even Pan created ten thousand copies of himself, volunteering to cook for the event.

Friends and strangers, people old and new, worked together to make the event memorable. Those who could, congratulated the couple personally. The rest merely did so talking to the city, knowing that their words would inevitably be heard.

Of course, that was only half of it. Thanks to Dallions empathy trait, and a few chatty items, all guardians in all three domains learned of the event as well, along with the plants and creatures of the area. Most of them had only a vague notion of what was happening, but it hardly mattered. The only thing of importance was that Dallion was involved, and that was more than enough to let them join the celebrations and chat a bit.

The sky lit up with sporadic fireworks, as the few remaining mages practiced for the evenings grand display.

The only rule that Dallion imposed was that no one was to make any gifts until the end of the war. For the most part, the rule was followed, although there were a few notable exceptions. Hannah was the chief culprit who, while maintaining her grumpy front, presented the pair with two dagger rings of sun gold. In her words, one could never have enough blades, especially in current times.

The Mirror Pool also banded together to present Dallion with a genuine spyglass. While having the appearance of a monocle, the items realm contained hundreds of echoes belonging to reliable contacts throughout the empire. Somewhat conflicted, Dallion acknowledged the gesture, although he had no intention of keeping anything from the Mirror Pool on his person.

At nightfall, under the seven Moons, the vows were officially given, making the union between Dallion Elazni and the former Gorgon Empress complete. The sky lit up with a fireworks display that combined with cloud structures to form a living picture above the ground. Cheers filled the air, as millions raised their mugs and glasses to celebrate the event. Sadly, before the festivities could come to an end, an event disrupted everything.

Dal, Veil said from within the domain. You better come to the main entrance.

Whats wrong? Dallion asked, giving a discreet sign to Euryale beside him.

*I think you better see this.*

## **REALM AWAKENING**

The city abruptly changed, replaced by its realm representation. Castled hills and mountains stretched as far as the eye could see. Several blue rectangles let Dallion know that cracklings had still taken root in a few buildings, but right now, that wasnt his main concern.

Casting a flight spell, he darted to the domains borders, where the inland city gate was. As expected, Veil was already there.

Well? Dallion looked at him.

This appeared. The overseer handed him a single sealed scroll. No one brought it. It just emerged out of nowhere and fell through into the domain.

I guess it was too much to hope that my actions would remain hidden for long.

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion broke the seal of the scroll. In each case, the message was the same:

*Youre urgently summoned to the Zodiac building.*

*- Order of the Twelve Suns*

Chapter 895: Gathering of the Twelve Suns

Called on my wedding day, Dallion grumbled internally as he walked through the streets of the imperial capital.

Even with the void threads gone, the place remained an alluring den of treachery. The only difference was that one sort of thread was replaced by several others. Among them, Dallion easily recognized the music skills of his own family. The Elazni were out in full force, it seemed, and now thanks to news of his victory over the Azures in the east, Dallion had given them a helping hand. One thing concerned Dallion, though. If the whole city was aware of the latest news, why hadn't the emperor summoned him?

Are you sure there's nothing you can tell, Adzorg? Dallion asked within his realm.

*Not a thing, dear boy. And I can assure you that I haven't made a Moon vow on the matter. The emperor simply has been occupied lately.*

*Occupied with what?*

*If I knew that, dear boy, I'd be on the other side of my lavish cell.*

Nobles of no consequence greeted Dallion as he walked by. Now that he was no longer seen as the bastard Elazni child, they had opened up a lot more. In terms of the capital, that meant that they had actively engaged in the expected ass-kissing-for-favors routine.

Welcome back, count, an overseer emerged a step away. Please allow me the honor of accompanying you.

Here we go again, Dallion thought. Despite the new appearance, he could tell that one of the archbishops' copyettes had come to have a word with him.

I didn't know it was necessary, he replied as arrogantly as possible.

It's just a courtesy. The duchess requested it.

My great-grandmother? That was surprising and alarming in equal measure. Most people would fear the power that came with the title. Right now, what Dallion most feared was that he had gone through with a marriage that she had expressly forbidden. Does she want me to go to her?

She would be delighted, I'm certain, but she only wants to ensure that you get an escort to where you're going.

*Not cryptic at all.*

Don't worry, families are like that, Vihrogon said in a dismissive fashion. She probably just wants to give you some life lessons on what it means to have a family.

That's what Dallion was worried about. Furthermore, it was unusual for an overseer to convey the message and not her trusted servant Taem.

In that case, can you get me there faster? Dallion kept up the act.

My pleasure, Count.

A bubble of reality formed around Dallion and the overseer as they sped through people, streets, and buildings straight to the Zodiac building. It was only at the front door that the overseer returned reality to normal. Annoyingly, he also chose not to disappear.

Are you escorting me inside? Dallion raised an eyebrow.

Of course not. That building is beyond my purview. I'm only to ensure that you enter it safely.

I'm a level one hundred noble. What could possibly happen to me? Dallion tilted his head in mock anger.

My task is only to obey the orders of the imperial family, not to make judgements. The overseer smiled. If I were to venture a guess, I'd say you were called on a rather important matter if such care was to be taken.

To the untrained ear, that sounded like a lot of nonsense. After his undercover work for the Order of the Seven Moons for so long, Dallion had learned to easily identify messages within messages. In this case, it seemed that the reason for which Dallion had joined the Twelve Suns might well have come into effect.

With a sigh and shrug, he walked up to the door. A doorkeeper bowed and quickly opened the door for Dallion to enter.

Normally, this was the point at which his personal guide would appear, but to Dallion's surprise, he found several other members there. A quick glance revealed that one of them was holding a scroll that seemed identical to what Dallion had received moments ago.

Night gathering? Dallion wondered.

The surprises continued in the common room. The place was virtually packed with awakened in travel gear. Those that weren't were in discussion with those that were inquiring what would be preferable for the situation.

The uncommon room wasn't any different, only the clothes and gear were more expensive. Dallion could feel the strength of the item guardians of them veterans, with multiple times more experience than their owners.

What's the fuss? Dallion asked a few nearby swords.

It's a hunt, sir. The weapon responded, recognizing Dallion as a member of the inner sanctum. We'll be going on a hunt.

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This sounded bad on many levels. Having a hunt during wartime was, if not suicidal, then a very stupid move. The strength gathered in this building alone was enough to take down half the force Dallion had faced recently. Not that he was complaining about his new troops, but the lowest levels he had seen so far were in the low sixties.

What hunt? he asked.

We haven't been told, sir. The sword replied. The last time so many gathered, we cleared out an ancient catacomb crawling with wyvern nests. Those were the days, sir. Absolutely glorious.

Moving on through the chatter, Dallion quickly went to the inner sanctum. He expected to find about a dozen people inside, which he did, yet not in his wildest dreams did he imagine he'd find his great-grandmother there as well.

Not too long ago, his flight instinct would have immediately triggered, forcing him to take a step back against the door he'd entered through.

Duchess, he greeted her as was etiquette upon seeing the head of his family. Receiving a brief nod from her, he then approached. I was not aware that you were a member.

Honorary member, she replied with the faintest hint of regret. It has been decades since I took part in actual events.

In another part of the large room, Dallion saw Aba Tamin discussing something with several other high-level members. The mage Pierce was among them, along with a few noble hunters. As could be expected, Tors was also with them. Seeing Dallion, however, he quickly muttered a quick word of apology and rushed to join him and Duchess Elazni.

You're finally here, Tors said, disapproval and disappointment emanating from him. We were talking about going ahead without you.

Don't be so overdramatic. The duchess quickly put him in his place. And filter your emotions. It's unbecoming.

Yes, great-grandmother. Instantly, any emotion streaming from the noble vanished.

Good. The reason I've come is to ensure that all hostilities between you cease once you leave this chamber. Am I understood?

Both Dallion and Tors nodded.

Good. You're not only inner sanctum members out there but also the face of House Elazni, and House Elazni stands united.

Once again, it was all about appearance. While it was acceptable, even welcome, that members of a family competed occasionally in lethal fashion for a better position within the family, when dealing with external matters, they had to stand by each other no matter what. A house divided was a weak house and nowhere was that more relevant than among domain rulers.

While being called on such a hunt is an undoubted honor, it's rather convenient that both of my gifted grandsons have been selected by name, she continued. It wouldn't be out of the question for someone to have put in a lot of effort to achieve such a result. As you know, accidents happen during hunting. She narrowed her eyes. Don't be among them.

The weight of her words suddenly increased, making Dallion feel as if someone had placed a mountain on top of him. Thanks to his current level, he could easily handle it, but it remained uncomfortable.

I trust you understand what I'm saying? She looked at each in turn.

Yes, Duchess, Dallion said.

Yes, great-grandma, Tors replied. Somehow, he had recently gotten back in her good graces.

Good. Tors, join the discussion with little Abba. She glanced in the direction of the nobles further away. Dallion, stay a moment.

Just great, Dallion thought. The only consolation was that he suspected that Tors was equally displeased, if not more. When it came to plotters, their greatest fear was that others were plotting against them.

I heard what happened, the woman said in a firm voice.

Which part, Duchess? Rumors have a tendency to

All of it, she cut him short.

There was no denying that she believed so, but Dallion doubted that she was aware of the half of it. You married her against my wishes.

That better not have been you, Adzorg! Dallion thought while maintaining his calm facade. The only other potential source was the Order of Seven Moons. It was very possible they maintained a hidden relationship with Duchess Elazni, given their past history.

The Alliance no longer exists, Dallion said calmly. What's left belongs to me now.

Which is why many consider you to become the new archduke, as you've probably heard.

Some of the rumors have reached my attention, yes, he admitted.

You've forgotten everything I tried to teach you. The duchess allowed herself a sigh. What did I say about rising too fast? Her voice had become so faint that even with all of Dallion's traits and skills, he could barely make it out. Your grandparents didn't listen and look what happened to them. The same is happening to you.

I'm not like him. I'm better

Prepared? Traces of pity formed on the woman's face. That man also said the same.

There wasn't a war back then. If I fall now, the nymphs will gain a foothold on this side of the continent.

There were wars back then. Not as serious as now, but it didn't stop people whispering in the right ears. Why do you think a hunt was organized right after you managed to obtain an army? Why do you think you and Tors were explicitly invited to take part?

Dallion suspected he had made enemies within the capital, but that sounded too far-fetched. There was no denying that the coincidence was quite appropriate, but still to organize such an elaborate way of killing him, and at this time, was less than likely.

The strength you've amassed equals that of a province. Three archdukes outright despise you, the remaining don't want to have a threat in their midst. I've instructed Tors to assist you, but I'm afraid whoever organized this might be aiming for the fall of Elazni.

You're wrong, Dallion thought. As the archbishop had told him, there was a target, but it wasn't Dallion. Abla was the greatest threat. If anything, Dallion suspected he was sent there to protect the noble.

*What do you think, Adzorg? Can someone be targeting me?*

*It's always a possibility. Taking on archdukes used to be fair game at one point. As the rules go, it's up to the high levels to guard their spot. If you can be taken down by something as trivial as an assassination attempt, you weren't the right person for it.*

*So much for the game of intrigue and politics.*

*Despite what the nobles of the capital claim, the war has gotten them nervous, and nervous people tend to go for a more straightforward approach.*

I'll keep my guard up, Duchess. Dallion forces a smile. I'll come back from this alive.

If I didn't think there was a chance, I wouldn't have bothered coming here. Remember, you might be the only full skill member, but you don't lead the hunt. Abla makes the decisions.

I'll be sure to keep that in mind.

The comment earned him an annoyed look.

What exactly are we going on a hunt for? Dallion asked. No one I asked seemed to know.

Dragons, Duchess Elazni said. The Academy has come across a dragon's nest and the Order's task is to clear it.

## Chapter 896: The Dragon Hunt

According to the bestiary that Dallion had obtained years ago, there were a total of seventeen known dragons dead or alive. Upon hearing that they'd be hunting a nest, his immediate thoughts were that he might set off to exterminate Dark's family. Hearing that the location was to the north didn't calm him down much, either. With the world being a globe, there was a chance that the fallen south could end up a lot closer to the imperial capital than one might expect.

Lift the walls, Pierce, Abla said in a loud voice.

Within seconds, the walls that separated the inner sanctum from the uncommon room slid up into the ceiling. The spell integrated within the structure was masterfully crafted, but Dallion's thoughts were elsewhere.

Veil, tell Hannah she's in charge, he said through his personal realm.

Your wife won't like that, the overseer replied.

*Tell Eury to go to the nearest monastery of the Order and ask for the offer that was promised.*

*That's a bit cryptic. Are you in trouble?*

*I don't know yet, but someone is.*

A second layer of walls vanished up into the ceiling, transforming the entire building into one massive chamber. Even so, everyone present knew their place. No one crossed the invisible lines,

demoting their status. Occasional shuffling took place as the more senior members moved closer to the center, finding their order within the hierarchy.

You all responded to the call, Aba said, putting an end to any whispers that were still taking place. The veterans will know what this means. To everyone else, the Order of the Twelve Suns has been tasked with a dragon hunt.

Eagerness and pride filled the space, emitted by virtually everyone. The emotions were so strong that Dallion felt as if he were stuck inside a ringing church bell.

The Mage Academy made the discovery a few weeks ago, Aba continued. The inner sanctum was made aware back then, but fighting on the fronts made it impossible for any action to be taken. Now, thanks to Bishop Dallion Elazni, who defeated the Azure forces in the far east, we've been granted a window of opportunity.

*Im a bishop now?*

Dallion had rarely heard so many lies stacked in one. For starters, he was never informed of the find. The archmage went out of his way to keep it secret. Also, from a military standpoint, Dallion hadn't achieved a victory, but rather avoided a defeat. He had been on the defensive and if it wasn't for the Alliances remaining troops he would have fled back to the imperial capital with nothing. Finally, he couldn't help but notice that there had been no mention of the Alliances destruction.

The information we have is scant, but we've managed hunts with less, Atla added, ending with a laugh.

A few chuckles followed from other members, though a lot less than Dallion thought there'd be.

I won't lie to you. The task is massive. The mages say that the nest holds several dozen dragonlets and young dragons, each of them capable of taking down several fourth-gaters. But that's not all. The reason that the entire Order was called upon was because a grand dragon was also spotted.

I don't like the sound of that, Dallion said to himself.

Just like an idiot to go poking for dragons in the middle of a war, Adzorg agreed with a grumble. If I still were archmage, I'd have put the nest off limits until the nymphs were defeated.

Clearly, the old mage remained convinced of the emperor's infallibility.

The speech went on in a mixture of praise and preparing the participants for the worst. At one point, one of the inner sanctum members made his way to Dallion. The approach was silent and faster than the eye could see. Dallion, though, had become above the average domain ruler.

Wait for the rush, then head for the war room, the person said. He was at least three quarters of a century old, with multiple scars on his face and neck. Even without asking, Dallion could tell that the man was a hunter and one with plenty of experience.

Where's the war room? Dallion whispered back.

Far end. The marble door.

No sooner had he said that, than the man moved away just as quickly as he had approached.



The emperor himself has acknowledged this as the Orders greatest mission! Atlas voice boomed, spreading threads of enthusiasm through the massive chamber. In typical empath fashion, he wasnt targeting the people directly, but the item guardians of their gear. For that reason, all of you will receive the greatest gift the Twelve Suns have to offer. He pointed in the direction of one of the remaining doors. Today, every member, regardless of rank, will be granted access to the skill awakening shrine! Take as much advantage of it as your skills allow!

If there was any doubt as to the rush it was now gone. Hundreds rushed in the direction indicated, bursting into instances as they did so. The temptation of endless levels shattered the usual decorum, as no one wished to be left out. The only people who remained still were those who had already reached the soft cap.

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Disgraceful, Duchess Elazni muttered, using her music skills to create a circle of dread around her. No one, even unwittingly, approached within ten feet of her, even if the majority had no idea why.

Dont miss your cue, dear boy, Adzorg reminded.

Dallion didnt need telling twice, quickly moving away from the main crowd and to the empty section of the building. It took him less than a second to reach the marble door.

Let me in, he told the guardian, noticing that the door had no lock of handle.

Without a word, a lock clicked, letting the door open a crack.

Stepping inside, Dallion found five people already present. All of them had the distinct appearance of hunters, along with a few others. Of them all, the only one Dallion was remotely familiar with was Astra. The woman had traded her usual fancy outfit for a full set of sky silver.

Close it, the hunter who had approached Dallion earlier said. Its enough that we have to hunt with that rabble.

Clearly not a people person, Dallion thought as he pushed the door shut.

Hi, Dal. Astra offered a smile. I see youve already met the Count, and everyone else, for that matter.

One of the hunters snorted in amusement.

Pleasure. Dallion nodded, glancing at everyone in turn. I thought titles werent used in the inner sanctum.

The Count is our exception. Hes the last of the old guard, and if hes to be believed, the second greatest hunter on the continent.

The second? Dallion asked within his realm.

The emperors the first, obviously, Adzorg replied.

Obviously, Dallion thought.

Lets get on with it, the Count took his seat at the small marble table in the center of the room. Forget everything you heard out there. Were going after the great dragon. Everything else is for show.

Why gather all the other members, then? Dallion took one of the free seats as well.

Time, Astra replied. With the war, we cant spend years chasing the creature. The common and uncommon members will spread out so we can cover a large area. Once they find the nest, itll be our turn.

Didnt the Academy find that already?

I told you to forget everything you heard out there, the Count hissed. They found something, tried to take it, then ran off once something larger came. They geared up and tried a second time, but the dragons were gone.

That sounded disturbing. For the Shimmering Circle to fail, the dragon had to be very powerful.

In short, they find it, we kill it, then bring the prize to the emperor.

Sounds a bit excessive. The emperor must love his trophies.

Half of the people at the table looked away, two let out a mocking laugh.

Oh, the trophy is worth the effort. For the first time since hed met him, Dallion thought he saw the Counts lips twist into a grin. A dragon that big is bound to have a Moonstone.

Moonstone? Dallions heart skipped a beat.

Now, that explained a great many things. Moonstones were a lot rarer than he initially thought. Initially, the mages trial had left him with the impression that they were rare, but findable resources, no different from artifacts. Since then, he had revised his opinion. All the time and money spent on ruin hunting had only earned him one additional Moonstone. Technically, he could obtain another if he destroyed the awakening shrine of his domain, but he didnt consider doing that even as a last resort.

More than one, if were lucky. For there to be a nest, there have to be two of them. Two great dragons. Itll be a difficult kill, so well have to split up. You have the highest magic in the Order, so youll focus on the stronger one. Pierce will deal with the other.

By deal, I assume you mean protect you lot? Dallion clarified.

Whatever works, the Count ignored the question. Whats important is to kill them fast and not let a vortex form. If one does form the man pointed at Dallion youll have to deal with that as well.

Naturally.

From what he could remember, dragons contained so much magic that upon death, part of their energy tore a piece of reality, giving birth to a void copy of the creature complete with skills and memories. If the dragons theyd face were stronger, the hunting party would have to kill them twice: once in their normal form, and once again in whatever form followed.

Theres still some time until the skill leveling is over, so take care of any unfinished business by then. And you. The count gave Dallion a stern look. Gear up.

Sure, Dallion replied. But before that, I have a question. I know I'm the newest one here, but are there any songs or records about facing a great dragon?

The silence was absolute. Even the emotions emanating from the people moments ago abruptly stopped.

Not even one?

The Order of the Seven Moons erased all knowledge on the matter. Astra was the one who spoke. We know that there've been dragon hunts in the past. Thanks to the Academy, we also know that Moonstones are obtained by slaying a great dragon, but other than that she shrugged.

We know that not all past hunts involved mages, so they can be defeated, another hunter added.

Magic only kills if it's stronger than the person it's facing, Dallion said. For all we know, killing the dragon might turn it into something much stronger.

Which is precisely why the emperor gathered the entire inner sanctum, the Count stressed. All of us are close to a hundred. We'll handle the matter. The only question is how many we'll lose in the process.

Only a hardened hunter could say that. Dallion had suspected something back when access to the skill shrine had been offered. There was no such thing as a free lunch. Back during the War of Inheritance in Wetie province, a similar offer had been made to anyone willing to join the army for one side or another.

Once again, I ended up like my grandfather, Dallion thought. Does anyone know how to fight a great dragon?

No, Harp replied. I didn't face any back in my age, and the Order was thorough in erasing all other knowledge. I might have killed one in the hands of my owners and I wouldn't even know.

That sounded rather excessive. With all information on the matter erased from the world, Dallion was heading into the hunt blind. Protecting Abla, not to mention himself, had become a whole lot more difficult.

#### Chapter 897: Awakened Realm Dragon

The inner sanctum split into two groups: the main one led by Abla, and the auxiliary, of which Pierce was in charge. Abla's group was half the size of the other, but when it came to awakened level the members were considerably higher.

Dallion, naturally, was part of Abla's group. As the top mage it was his job to protect the group from any spells that the dragons could cast. Along with him were the Count, Astra, two more noble hunters, and Tors. The latter was a little too eager to have been selected. Despite claims that there were no titles in the inner sanctum, outside the Order of the Twelve Suns, Abla remained an important noble in the main imperial family. Kissing up to him went a long way, especially if someone was aiming for the new archduke title. Dallion had no doubt that his relative was using the hunt to prove what a good fit he would be.

Heres where the dragons were spotted. Aba gave Dallion a map of the northern area. Whoever had done it had put in a lot of effort, achieving a level of quality that would make Earth cameras envious. Take us right there.

Sure. Dallion chose not to summon his aura sword. Do I wait for Pierce and his group?

Aba glanced over his shoulder. A short distance away, Pierce was discussing something with three hunters. No emotions could be caught emanating from them, but based on their expressions, they were displeased about something.

Keep him within sight, but dont wait. Hell let me know if theres trouble.

Right. Dallion cast a mass spell. All members of his group rose up into the air.

Blocks of sun gold bladerers flocked towards them. From a hundred feet away, they kept on observing the group, remaining motionless like ominous floating statues. This was the first instance in which Dallion witnessed the emperors paranoia. Having seen the ruler in person, he knew how powerful the man was. He could easily use his domain rulers abilities to follow exactly what was happening within the capital or, failing that, order the overseers to do so. Having bladerers involved so openly was counterproductive.

Youre overthinking things, dear boy, Adzorg said. Bladerers and metalins have always moved about the capital.

*I know, but why?*

Dallion spent a few moments using magic threads to attach the rest of his group to him. Once done, he finally cast the flight spell that propelled them onward.

The immediate domain barrier of the palace came and went, releasing them into the larger territory of the Tamin Empire. From there, it was going to be a few hours flight until they reached the real border.

The rest of the Order, from what Dallion had been told, would be transported in bubbles of reality by the imperial overseers. The approach bore a striking resemblance to the Star cults method of travel. Hopefully, the outcome would be better.

The further they went north, the more the terrain changed. It was a gradual shift, but traveling at such speeds, one got to see it happen in real time. Large vegetation grew more and more sparse. Forests were the first to go, shrinking into clusters of trees, then vanishing altogether. Bushes and grass grew smaller and smaller, yet never completely disappeared. After several hours, nothing more than a layer of green moss covered the ground. There were no seas, no lakes, not even any rivers to speak of.

There was no wonder why the empire hadnt expanded in that direction. Even the south was bursting with potential in comparison. Concentrating, Dallion used his forging skills in the hopes of finding any ore of marginal importance, yet failed. The land had absolutely nothing.

Were getting near, Aba shouted.

The noble had memorized the map, same as Dallion. If the Academy was to be believed, it was in the start of a natural canyon located between two slightly elevated sheets of rock. Calling them mountains would be like referring to a flowerpot as a jungle.

Gradually reducing the flight speed, Dallion landed along with the group at the estimated location, then removed the magic thread safeguards.

When was the sighting? he asked.

Between weeks and months, Ablā replied. The Academy isn't very straightforward with their information.

I don't see any magic, Dallion looked at the ground at his feet. No illusions, either.

The mages would have mentioned it had there been any, the Count grunted in disapproval.

Dallion split into instances. For the next three seconds, hundreds of him carefully examined everything in a hundred-foot radius. Spells were cast, magic threads observed after which he decided to have a chat with the moss.

Hey, he said.

Normally, talking with moss would be impossible. Even when combining herbalism and scholarly skills, communicating with that particular plant required an almost surreal vagueness of concepts beyond the capabilities of most sentient creatures. For that reason, Dallion used spellcraft to use the magic threads themselves as a means of communication.

Hello? The moss asked, confused that anything was addressing it. In its experience, only the light of the sun was interactable.

Am I the first person you've talked to? Dallion chose to take it slow.

I can hear you. The moss didn't understand the question.

*Have you heard anyone before me?*

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A chorus of thousands replied no. Yet, a small group among them said yes. It was a cluster on the edge of the area Dallion was exploring. Leaving his instances to fade away, he rushed in the direction, then engaged in splitting once more.

Who has heard someone before me? he asked again.

A trail of answers made him go forward. Sensing something important was happening, the rest of the party joined him.

For several minutes Dallion followed the trail of yesses. It was a strange trail, shaped like a blob of water that had been spilled on the ground. It stretched for thousands of feet, continuing northwest, then suddenly stopped.

What's wrong? Ablā asked.

The trail ends. Dallion split into instances again, to confirm his suspicion. Something passed through here, then vanished. No way to tell what it was for sure, but unless the mages were playing around on the moss, it should be our target.

The trail ends here? Astrā walked up to Dallion.

Yeah. Dallion took a step back. Remembering the Dragon in the fallen south, he had a pretty good idea what had happened. They've entered the wilderness, he added.

A less experienced group would have laughed at him, but everyone present was a domain ruler with enough of knowhow to know exactly what he meant. Three of them sunk into the ground without another world. Dallion followed.

## **AREA AWAKENING**

The wilderness expanded in all directions like a chaotic sea of bleak ash. Since he had become a domain ruler, Dallion had seen the wilderness on several occasions, though not like this. There was a sense of abandonment all around. It wasn't the void, although there were a few patches of that visible as well, like clusters of black fog. Rather, it seemed like this was the part of the world that was composed of basic foundations and nothing else.

As the rest of the group appeared, Dallion could spot the bubbles of emotions within them. Most had eagerness and bloodthirst the size of cherries scattered throughout their body. Tors, on the other hand, had a blob of fear the size of a melon.

First time in the wide wilderness? Abba turned to Tors.

The other nodded.

Don't think anything of it. Stay away from the void clouds and you'll be fine.

Void clouds, the Count snorted. Back in my day, it took a lot more to be called a void cloud. They were large as mountains and sticky as quicksand, ready to pull you in.

Of course they were, Dallion said to himself.

Up until recently, the void had a far larger presence. With the death of the general, and the aether vortexes brought by Adzorgs device, a lot of it had been diminished. Seeing remnants of it was a reminder that one could never get rid of it fully.

Can you track them? Astra asked.

That was a difficult question. Magic threads were visible among the bleakness, but they were few and far between.

It won't be easy, Dallion admitted. I haven't tracked a creature through realms before. We might go following magic threads, but we'll need to get lucky.

We do it the old-fashioned way then, sir? The Count turned to Abba. Pick a direction and keep going?

Everyone knew there was no point in splitting up. If any single person were to come upon a stronger dragon, they would end up as an instant fatality. Against creatures such as this, they couldn't even run.

What's your perception? Abba asked Dallion.

In the nineties. He gave a vague reply.

Astra, you take the lead.

In the real world, Dallion would have been the obvious choice, since he was the only one who could fly. Here, every domain ruler could.

Surrounding herself with her own bubble of reality, Astra slid forward.

Shes done that before, Dallion said as he used his domain ruler powers to do the same.

Skills are everything, one of the hunters said. As a child, she wanted to become an overseer. Her father had an overseer take her into the wide wilderness and shock her enough to reconsider.

I guess it worked.

Not entirely. She was terrified alright, but determined not to have anything else frighten her again.

You realize, of course, dear boy, thats all a bunch of nonsense, Adzorg commented. Some are just naturally predisposed to certain things. Just as Vend was good at splitting. I doubt that anyone would have sent a child to the border.

*Why not?*

*Because no one would risk sending an overseer that far out. Its like letting a kite loose in a storm. Theres every chance that they lose themselves and for no gains. If it wasnt the case, nobles would have simply sent out armies of overseers to conquer the world on their behalf ages ago.*

The surroundings shifted as the awakened floated through. While there was no getting used to the chaotic shifts and movements, one quickly found a few firm rules they could abide by. Like an ever-shifting wave, the dark rocks that composed everything rose and fell, occasionally slamming into each other. Only the void clouds remained static, clinging to their space, regardless of the grounds movements.

What if theyre not here? Tors asked, still nervous.

Theyre here, Abla replied. Alien wouldnt dare lie to the emperor.

What if he doesnt think hes lying? Mages arent infallible.

Suddenly, tendrils shot out from a nearby void cloud. Their speed was impressive, or it would have been if the people present didnt have their traits in the nineties and above. With an almost lazy motion, Abla sent a spark infused point punch at the cloud, shredding it along with its tendrils.

Theyre here, he replied, as if the attack hadnt happened. Just stay on guard and keep your eyes open. I dont want to be the one to tell the duchess that wed lost you.

And thats the person wholl be keeping an eye on me? Dallion sighed internally.

He has skills, Giaccia said from his realm. Just not for the wilderness.

*Thats why taking a sheltered into the wilderness is never a good idea.*

The further north they went, the more void appeared. The puffs of mist became as large as sticky hedges, then walls, requiring that spark attacks be used for the group to move on.

Tors might be right, Dallion said reluctantly. Dragons wouldnt allow that much void near their nest.

Theyre smart, the Count muttered. Void is the only thing they can use to hide behind.

You dont seriously think Dallion stopped. A bright glow of magic had suddenly appeared further ahead, coming from the hole Astra had punctured in the massive void cloud. Stop! he raised his left hand.

Immediately, everyone obeyed, freezing in place. The reality bubbles warped out of existence, letting them set foot on the shifting ground.

I think we found one.

## Chapter 898: Dragon Pack

Everyone in the party concealed themselves. Blocker items were placed, artifacts were activated, making every member of the group absolutely invisible, even to the eyes of a high-leveled mage. Knowing that his own illusion spells wouldnt fool a dragon, Dallion summoned Gleam, who was more than eager to join in.

No fighting, Dallion whispered within his awakening realm. Not until we get a sense of whats going on.

Just promise not to forget. The shardfly wrapped him in her wings, transforming them both into a copy of void smoke. Her attitude had drastically changed since his victory over Giaccia. Despite being his companion for a significant portion of time, she remained a creature of the wilderness and as such had a built-in reaction to strength.

The purple glow ahead intensified. It was as if someone with a lantern was making his way slowly through the opening in the mist. The seconds dragged on. In his mind, Dallion went through possible approaches. So far, hed faced two dragons and barely defeated the shadow of one. Currently, his level was greater than both, but that was no guarantee.

Finally, the creature emerged.

A dragonlet? Dallion wondered.

Concentrating, he focused on the magic threads of the being, looking for any signs of illusions. There didnt seem to be any. The dragon was indeed a pup. Barely larger than a horse, it moved about with its floppy orange wings, curious at the opening that had formed within the void mist.

Taking a few steps to the side, Dallion looked further along the hole behind the dragon. Other than the usual shifting terrain, there didnt seem to be anything important.

Time had come for the first decision of the mission: whether to attack the creature or leave it be. Alternatively, Dallion could take off his blocker ring and

A sphere appeared out of nowhere, hitting the dragonlet in the head. The moment it did, the creature stopped moving, as if taken out of time.

Its fine. A noble hunter re-emerged. Other members of the group followed.

Lose the illusion, Dallion whispered to Gleam. But remain as you were. He didnt like the current turn of events. The hunter in him agreed with the decision to take out the dragonlet quickly and efficiently before it could attract attention. The empath side, though, considered the approach reckless and unnecessary.



Looks young, the Count approached. Probably a decade real time at most. No doubt were dealing with a pack.

It couldnt have made it here alone. Astra remained on guard. There must be others.

Maybe, maybe not. The big ones must have surrounded their stomping grounds with void to keep everything out. The bigger ones dont need to keep track.

It was a valid explanation, but Dallion still felt on edge.

Its orange, he said. Might mean it belongs to Dararr.

A reaction dragon, Ablamused. That might make things tricky.

Prison items still work, the hunter who used the sphere said. As long as we

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

A new hole burst into the void mist barrier, only this time the force that made it came from the other side. A fifty-foot dragon emerged, dashing towards the hunter near the dragonlet.

Any lesser awakened would have been caught by now, but thankfully the mans speed allowed him to burst into instances just in time to avoid a fatal blow.

Line attacks split the air, all aimed at the creature. This was the first time that Dallion witnessed how a party of top-level awakened fought. It could by no means be called collaborative, and yet thanks to their high traits, it also was. Every member did their own thing with no regard for anyone else, fully aware that they had the skills to avoid any large-scale attacks.

Using her guard skills, Astra avoided the attacks of her allies, while also completing a full guard sequence. Dallion witnessed her speed double, then triple as time slowed down for her. Meanwhile, Ablaperformed a multi point attack, using her as a cover.

Astras speed increased more and more, as she avoided each of the blows. The dragon, though, wasnt able to. Brute force hit its body, pushing it back.

Time for support. Dallion summoned his harpsisword and played a chord. Tors, interestingly enough, did the same. His weapon was clearly inferior, though still befitting a member of House Elazni. Waves of music strands stuck to the massive creature. The dragon had no issue ripping them apart, slowing down just a fraction as it did. That time provided an opening for the other members of the group to continue with their attacks.

Two spheres flew towards the beings body. All that was needed was one hit for it to freeze like the dragonlet. By all accounts, this was where the fight should have ended. No matter a creatures abilities, once it was trapped in a prison item, it was impossible to escape. Only, it didnt.

Both spheres hit the dragon on the side. However, it didnt stop. Dallion saw several orange scales fall off, each wrapped in a thin layer of aether.

Oh, crap! Its covered in aether! he shouted. Standard attacks have no effect!

He played another chord, combining his music skill with spark. More scales shed off the dragon, by no means deterring it. With a roar, the creature flapped its wings, sending a wall of wind at half of the party.

Not in the least intimidated, Ablā sliced through the attack with his sword, following up with a spark infused line attack. One of the hunters wasn't as strong, allowing himself to be pushed a few dozen feet back before retaining their ground.

Dallion grabbed the hilt of the harpsword with his right hand, while summoning his aura sword with his left.

The dragon took advantage of the momentary lull in attacks, dashing in to chomp the Count in two with its massive jaws. Before it could reach its target, Astra appeared, landing a heavy blow on the top of its head. Sound as loud as thunder ripped through the air. The dragon toppled, its head slamming into the ground.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

### **SHOCK EFFECT**

**REFLEX DRAGONs movement has been reduced by 10% for two minutes.**

**Attack effectiveness reduced by 50% for two minutes.**

Combining music with magic and attack skills, Dallion waved his aura sword, covering the beast with weight symbols.

It's down, he said. Not sure how long it will hold.

All three hunters in the party rushed forward, eager to take advantage. Dallion could almost see the targeting markers appear on the dragons weak spots.

The Count was first to attack, thrusting his sword into the dragons eye. The target proved hard as diamond, causing the blade to bounce off with nearly no effect. A second of the hunters went for the side, going for the spots which had lost their scales. He was slightly more successful, though the blade didn't sink in more than a few inches.

The last of the trio went for the back of the neck. One could assume that he was aiming to use brute strength to try and cause damage to the creatures spine. Before he could do so, the monsters tail twisted like a whip, striking him in the chest.

### **MAJOR WOUND**

**PHILL GOTTA's health has been reduced by 50%**

No one said a word as the man was violently thrown back. Instead, everyone doubled their efforts.

Astra joined in again, continuing with a series of point attacks, aimed at what could be seen of the dragons underbelly.

Count! Dallion shouted as he drew several softness symbols on the dragons eyes. Try again!

The old man didn't need reminding as he spun in place and once again struck the creatures left eye. This time the blade pierced through, sinking all the way to the hilt.

### **FATAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 500%**

A massive roar filled the air. For a split second, the white rectangle flashed over the creature, disappearing before Dallion could get a good look. What he did manage to get a glimpse of was that the dragons health was down to roughly a fifth. The attacks seemed to work, despite appearances of the opposite.

Its at eighteen percent, Abl shouted. Finish it off! He leaped forward, slamming the side of the dragons left wing with a spark attack. Scales fell off like autumn leaves. The dragon struggled to break loose, yet Tors and Dallion were managing to keep it on the ground.

Blades slammed against dragon scales and they seemed to be winning, when suddenly a new force broke through the void mist again.

A second dragon, just as big as this, charged forward without mercy. Everyone close to the fallen dragon burst into instances, leaping away as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, in one case, it wasnt enough.

### **FATAL WOUND**

**YENS XANIANS health has been reduced by 75%**

### **ARM SEVERED**

**YENS XANIANS will no longer be able to make use of his right arm**

Red rectangles appeared as the new dragon chomped off the mans arm all the way to the shoulder. It was pure luck that the rest of him managed to escape any subsequent strikes. If this were the real world, hed be already dead. Here, he remained just as active as before. Of course, one more hit was enough to seal his awakened powers.

Get out! Abl shouted, throwing his sword at the fallen dragon. Youre no use here.

The hunter vanished in a flash of green light, leaving six behind.

### **MODERATE HIT**

**Damage dealt is increased by 200%**

Another rectangle appeared as Ablass blade sunk into the wounded dragons eye. The strike was impressive, though not enough to kill off the creature. That was when the blade changed form. Doubling in size, it cracked the dragons skull, moving further in. Several more red rectangles emerged, after which they quickly disappeared in a cloud of red particles, along with the dragons entire body.

Thats one, Dallion said, redirecting his magic attack on the new dragon.

Behind him, a dozen more balls of purple light were glowing through the mist, like fireflies in the night.

Theres more of them, Dallion shouted.

Fortunately, when the first few fully emerged, it turned out that they were no larger than a horse.

Theyre just dragonlets, he added. Freeze them!

Having them locked in prison realms would no doubt be uncomfortable, but it was better than killing them. Right now, it was better than fighting them. While they could hardly present a challenge, the dragon species scales had proven they could withstand several direct strikes.

Focus on the big one! Tors yelled, as he kept on playing chord after chord. While not as naturally talented as Dallion, his music skills were adequate for support. The issue was that the new dragon had already gotten an idea of the groups capabilities. Like everything else in the awakened world, defeating it wouldnt be so easy.

Gleam, get me to see his info rectangle, Dallion ordered.

The shardfly stretched her wings, fluttering up into the sky. Dust from her wings filled the air, covering everything in sight. Initially, there was no change. After a few moments, however, white rectangles emerged.

## **ADOLESCENT DRAGON**

**Species: REFLEX DRAGON**

**Class: MAGIC**

**Health: 98%**

**Traits:**

- **BODY 75**
- **MIND 60**
- **REACTION 100**
- **PERCEPTION 60**
- **MAGIC 40**

**Skills:**

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **Scale shield (Species Unique)**
- **Aether shield (Species Unique)**
- **Weakness: EYES**

That was it? The dragon they were fighting wasnt even a full dragon. Not only that, but it had barely five skills. Even Dark was more capable. Although, the species unique skills were a rather annoying combination that ensured protection against all types of attacks, even spark.

Are you sure thats all? Dallion asked.

Thats as good as itll get, Gleam replied, only for him to hear. If anything mores hidden, I cant reveal it.

There was a possibility that the creature had several more skills hidden behind some sort of natural illusion. If it didn't, though, that presented a problem. So far, the elite group had already lost one member, and another had lost half his health. If they were having trouble against this one, what would the battle against the great dragon be like?

## Chapter 899: The Order's Support

Another dragonlet froze, captured by coming into contact with the prison sphere. The issue was that the hunter who used them only had three. He was one of those specialized in taking on large game; matched against a pack of small creatures, he fared no better than anyone else. The issue was that with six people remaining, there was no one who could exclusively focus on the smaller pests.

Although incapable of flight, the new large dragon had learned a lot from the group's encounter with the previous one. It was much better at evading point attacks, and line attacks even when infused with spark had no effect on its magic-coated scales. To make matters worse, it also made attempts at using standard guard skills. In comparison to the attacks, the attempts were clumsy, always ruined before a full sequence could be completed, but it was one more thing to worry about.

Performing a line attack with his aura sword, Dallion used the motion to cast another healing spell aimed at Abba. Knowing that speed was of the essence, the high noble had focused exclusively on attack. As a result, several of his attacks had gone in, dealing minor damage. The price was getting a few hits of his own. Individually, they weren't anything much, but as everyone knew, even small things mattered in large amounts.

### TERMINAL STRIKE

#### **Damage dealt is increased by 1000%**

A dragonlet plopped on the ground, moments before its body disappeared into a cloud of fading particles.

Eight left! the Count shouted.

Seven and one big one, Astra corrected.

With the white rectangle revealed, fighting the creature was significantly easier than before, although not to the point they could relax. It was notable that no one, not even Dallion, used any of their top-tier attacks.

I can take some of the pups, the spectral shardfly whispered to Dallion. I think I could take the big one as well.

No, Dallion said firmly.

Slashing the air with his aura sword, he drew more weight symbols on the dragon's body. The creature was probably bearing the weight of a mountain, but that only marginally slowed it down.

Every instinct in Dallion screamed for him to end with his support and join the attacking group. Five people dealing with seven dragonlets was feasible. After that, everyone could focus on the big one again. The wiser him decided to wait. If his suspicions were correct, the enemies he'd face this hunt wouldn't just come from outside the party.

I've softened the eyes, he shouted, as a new set of magic symbols took hold.

Abla and the Count darted at full speed. Each took a side from which they charged, aiming at the creatures weak spots. The dragon seemed to be expecting that, for it spun around, using his wings and tail as weapons.

The strikes were unsuccessful, though they forced the two nobles to pull back. Astra, on the other hand, took it upon herself to leap over and focus a point attack aimed at the dragons head.

### **MINOR ATTACK**

**Dealt damage is increased by 10%**

A few scales tore off the side of the monsters cheek. Not losing determination, Astra followed up with a second attack, though the dragon quickly extended its wing, using it as a shield.

Its catching on quick, Dallion thought.

Magic spheres emerged in the air, pouring aether shards on the back of the dragon. Facing an attack it was unfamiliar with, the creature moved its wings, shielding itself from the new source of damage. That proved just enough for Abla to do his thing. Taking a step back, the man threw his sword as if it were a spear.

The weapon split the air, changing shape as it did. The massive blade shrank in width, taking on the form of a five-foot needle. Then, it struck.

### **TERMINAL STRIKE**

**Damage dealt is increased by 1000%**

First strike, Dallion thought.

The attack was identical to last time. Now all that was left was the second phase.

### **MINOR STRIKE**

**Damage dealt is increased by 10%**

Dozens more red rectangles appeared, stacking on one after the other. Whatever changes the blade was going through, it was devouring its target from the inside, like a shoal of piranhas. The dragon roared and twisted in agony for a few seconds, after which it fell lifelessly to the ground. Another moment later, the second large dragon was gone, its body vanishing in a cloud of particles.

Now, there were only seven creatures left, all of them dragonlets.

Tors, focus on the mist! Dallion ordered. There might be more.

I know that! The Elazni hissed. Still, he had the discipline to keep himself from doing anything senseless. Both he and Dallion remained at the ready, carefully observing the void mist.

Nothing appeared in the next ten seconds. Another ten seconds later, Tors refocused his attention on the fight against the dragonlets. While clumsy and considerably smaller, they proved more difficult to deal with than initially expected. For one thing, they shielded their eyes a lot more, forcing the awakened to take them using brute strength. For another, they werent bound by Dallions magic symbols.

Line attacks ceased with everyone shifting to close range point strikes. Every few moments, a series of red rectangles would cluster above a dragonlet, preceding the dematerialization of its body. After close to a minute, the only dragons left standing were those trapped by the prison items.

Stolen story; please report.

Are we good? the Count asked.

Difficult to tell, Dallion and Ablā replied simultaneously. Wisely, Dallion let the party leader continue. I don't feel anything, but I didn't feel them approach the first time, either. He turned to Dallion.

I don't see any magic glow, Dallion added. We might be safe for the moment, but don't count on it too much.

Guess we'll have to take our chances. Ablā unsummoned his weapon.

Shortly later, the others followed.

The first order of business was to check everyone's condition. Most had gotten away with a few minor scrapes that Dallion quickly healed. The only one who had suffered any serious damage was the hunter who had been taken out at the start of the fight. In addition to losing half his health, he had apparently also suffered a nasty permanent effect, rendering him semi-useless in any serious future fights. Dallion tried a few spells to remedy his condition, but neither proved effective. For all intents and purposes, the party had just been reduced to five.

Tell Pierce what happened, then return to the capital, Ablā ordered.

The hunter didn't look in the least bit pleased, but he nodded. A blink of an eye later, he was gone.

Two dragons, two wounded, Astra said. Not a total disaster.

Those were adolescents, Dallion said in a dark tone. Adolescents and dragonlets. They were also feral.

Feral dragons? Tors asked. Didn't know such a thing could exist.

Happens with creatures when they breed uncontrollably, the Count explained. Haven't seen it occur with dragons, but if there's a pair that's been left undisturbed for a long time, well

A pair of dragons, Dallion thought. With creatures made entirely of magic, a partner wasn't necessary for them to multiply. Magic threads could be split off from the main body, retaining the essence of the original beast but with enough personality to create a being with its own personality. At the same time, the Count was also correct a pair of hidden ancient dragons could well fill out an entire nest.

A nest of ferals, Dallion said. They must have ventured out on their own, copying behavior they've seen from their parents.

Cast out, the Count corrected. Three skills, unable to fly. It's safe to say that they were the weaklings of the litter.

A bit convenient they'd appear now, isn't it? Dallion glanced towards Tors, then Ablā.

Hardly. The Shimmering Circle has been dragon searching for years. All the ones theyve found so far werent worth the Orders effort. This was the first one they werent able to handle. Which is why the emperor thinks its worth the prize. He went up to Dallion and tapped him on the shoulder.

The explanation made sense, although it still didnt provide a reason for the dragons not being discovered until now. Subtly, Dallion slid off his blocking item.

*Adzorg, any reason why dragons that remained hidden for centuries would suddenly become active?*

*Dragons arent my specialty, dear boy. However, I suspect you might be onto something.*

Its the mate, the Count said, examining one of the living dragonlets. With the war covering half the world, the creatures in hiding must have gone to a place where its calm. Theres the fallen south.

Which is impossible to reach unless youre already there, Astra added.

And the forbidden north. Its safe to say where this pair decided to go.

Two great dragons, both heading north? Dallion looked at the Count. Pretty big coincidence.

The world isnt as big as it once was. The empire has the continent. The Azures have the sea. You do the math. The little buggers must have been conceived in the realms. Id bet my hair that theyve probably never set foot in the real world.

A terrible thought occurred to Dallion. If feral dragons were awakened creatures, all this fight achieved was to drive them out of the realm with their powers sealed. Although, since the creatures were made of magic, that could also mean that theyd been killed. If awakened mages had their powers sealed, theyd lose their magic, being driven insane as a result. What if a creature was composed of magic itself? Would there be anything left to return to the real world? Judging by the partys lax behavior, they didnt seem to think so.

What now? Dallion unsummoned his weapons.

What else? A bubble of reality surrounded Abla. We continue through the mist wall.

Passing to the other side of the void revealed a sight no different from the one they had left. The terrain remained dark, bleak, and shifting, covered with occasional void clouds sticking to the ground. Looking into the distance, the faint outline of another thick mist wall was visible. Ten minutes later, it was confirmed a wall of void mist surrounded the area like a thin band.

Initially, one might suspect that it was meant as a protection keeping hunters and curious awakened out. However, it could equally be meant to prevent the feral dragons from leaving.

Splitting into hundreds of instances, each of the remaining members explored the encircled area foot by foot. Other than some magic traces which clearly came from the dragons nothing of interest was found. The entire place was one big nothing, leaving the group to the single conclusion that the path had to continue into the real world. Summoning their weapons, the nobles formed a circle, their backs to each other, then simultaneously left the awakened realm.

The change was abrupt, causing sunlight to flood their senses. Caught off guard, Tors split into a dozen instances. Everyone else remained as they were, staying vigilant.



Doesnt look like any are here, the Count said. Prodigy, any magic traces?

Nothing I can see, Dallion replied. Nothing fresh in any event.

Fresh is a relative term, Gleam said, fluttering above him, wrapped in an illusion of invisibility. Theres nothing on this spot, but thats not the case everywhere.

I think there might be something, he added out loud. Show me.

Just to let you know, Eury has done what you asked, Veil told Dallion now that his blocker item was removed. Shes not too happy about it.

I bet, Dallion replied as he kept walking after Gleam. Did the archbishop break his promise?

*The bishop who met her claimed to be an old friend of yours. Of ours actually. Remember the albino cleric who was with us during the first chainling hunt?*

That was a bad turn of events. Dallion knew for a fact that Cleric was a copyette posing as a human. Officially, he had taken on the role of archbishop of Nerosal and the de facto ruler of the city. There was no reason for him to go so far east, unless the archbishop had something specific in mind.

**Cleric has granted you full control of the Land of NEROSAL.**

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

**Cleric has granted you full control of the Land of MONASTERY 1902.**

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

**Cleric has granted you full control of the Land of MONASTERY 1903.**

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

**Cleric has granted you full control of the Land of MONASTERY 1904.**

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

**Cleric has granted you full control of the Land of MONASTERY 1907.**

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

**Cleric has granted you full control of the Land of MONASTERY 1908.**

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

**You have broken through your one hundred and twenty-seventh barrier.**

**You are level 127.**

**Choose the 17 traits you value the most.**

Rectangles stacked up in front of Dallions eyes.

What do you know, Veil commented. The Order of the Seven Moons decided to honor their promise, after all.

Yeah, Dallion could only say. Curious timing.

#### Chapter 900: Spire Fragment

Dallion quickly cast an illusion to hide his level. Supposedly, there were no mages in the current party, but even so he couldn't take the chance there was no telling what artifacts they were equipped with.

In a single instant, the territory that Dallion controlled had increased five times, effectively putting him in control of the largest domain within the empire by far. The Order of the Seven Moons had been very devious with the territories they had given. On the surface, it was nothing more than five monasteries, among hundreds. Those five monasteries, however, came with territories that extended from the eastern borders of the Tamin empire all the way to the ocean, not to mention a small chunk of Weties province. The latter was what Dallion considered the second most disturbing occurrence. Receiving control of Nerosal so soon after the civil war in the province was hazardous to say the least. He strongly suspected that was the reason the archbishop had given it to him. Even if Dallion were to deny it, no one would believe he wasn't making a go at the archduke title. Some might even accuse him of going against the throne.

You were right, great-grandma, Dallion said to himself. They've forced my hand.

Thankfully, there were still a few moves he could make.

The greatest concern on the matter, of course, remained his current level. From what he remembered of his brief interactions with the emperor, the man had a level of a hundred and twenty. Could it be that thanks to the archbishops generous donation, he had surpassed Tamin?

That's wishful thinking, dear boy. Adzorg sounded rather amused. Keep in mind that the emperor rules over the archdukes. Your domain might be large, but it's less than all of theirs combined.

There was no denying that, yet Dallion vividly remembered what he had seen. The only explanation could be that the emperor was hiding his real level as well.

It was unusually good for the Order to give the support they promised, the old mage continued. In my experience, they exclusively rely on promises. Would have been a lot more useful if they had provided the territory while you were actually facing the nymphs, of course.

Harp, Dallion said within his domain. Where's the grand citadel?

The one I knew was a few eras back, the harpsword guardian replied.

*The Order of the Seven Moons rests on tradition. Where is it?*

*On an island in the ocean. You can only reach it by boat or swimming.*

Or flying, Dallion added.

There've been other sightings, Astra told Abba. Single dragonlets most of the time. Pierce says he found a big one, but I doubt it was any bigger than ours.

Over two dozen dragonlets, the noble mused. Thats too many.

What do you expect when you have a pair of dragons that fly through domains? the Count asked. Its a wonder we didnt come across them sooner.

Yes, a real wonder Dal, found anything?

Yep, Dallion replied. Gleam had taken him to a spot which had a distinct presence of magic, as if the ground itself had recently soaked off some from a magic container.

A sudden idea came to mind, making Dallion summon his aetherizer. The device functioned as an advanced vortex finder, but given that dragons were largely magic, it was also possible that it might find them as well.

*Would you look at that?*

Three dots appeared. In terms of vortex strength, they were barely more than a level one the type found in the Academy sewers but they were there.

There are a few this way, Dallion said. Thirty, maybe forty miles. Dallion put the device away.

A few dragons, Tors snorted. Lets hope they arent bigger than the last bunch.

It was decided not to use magic to reach the destination, so as not to raise suspicion. By the time they got there, Dallions suspicions were confirmed. A total of three dragons between a dragonlet and an adolescent dragon were found fighting one another amid a series of strange rock formations. The fight must have been going on for a while, for scales were scattered on the ground. Just as the creatures before, these seemed feral, incapable of flight and magic.

The resulting attack was brief and non-consequential. Dallion and Tors bound the creatures with music and magic, while Ablas, Astra and the Count directly went for the dragons eyes. Interestingly enough, the creatures bodies also evaporated in a cloud of magic.

How many do you think there are? Dallion asked.

Hundreds likely. Abba shrugged. The mages must have disrupted something, causing the weaklings to spill throughout the area.

Youre not buying the archmages report, I take it?

Hes an Academy mage, Abba said in the tone reserved for addressing bad pets. They overestimated themselves, underestimated the situation, and we got this. Theres a reason Academy mages arent invited to the Order. The last thing we need are maniacs who think theyre all-powerful.

That sounded like the perfect description of most mages Dallion had seen, unfortunately. Naturally, he chose not to point out that technically, he too was an Academy mage.

Stolen novel; please report.

With the trio of dragons gone, everyone split into instances to search for clues again. To little surprise, a clue was found. To everyones astonishment, it was Tors who found it. He was the only sheltered among the group, yet as luck would have it, the only piece of scenery out of place happened to be in his slice of exploration; namely, the base of a column barely visible beneath the moss that covered it.

Normally, finding a past age ruin, even in this desolate location, wouldnt be unusual. With five past eras, it was expected to have buildings scattered about indiscriminately. What was different on this occasion was the size of the column base stretching dozens of feet across. The sheer massiveness was the initial reason it had been mistaken for a part of the terrain. When Tors had reached the edge, though, he had spotted the faint regular curve, and after removing a bit of moss the obvious difference of material.

The moment he saw it, Dallion immediately made the connection. This wasnt a structure created by any of the seven races; it had to be built by the creatures that were in the world before colossi.

Its dead, Tors said. I checked its awakening realm. What do you think it is?

There isnt supposed to be anything this far north. Astra turned to Abl.

Its not nymph, thats for sure, he said, avoiding the question. Doesnt look dryad, either. Might have been copyette.

The Count visibly reacted, though didnt say a word. Any experienced hunter had gone through enough wilderness ruins to know the basic racial architectures. Barely anything remained from the column, but even looking at it was clear that it didnt belong to any race.

Must have been a marker column. Dallion joined in the game. There'd be more if it were a building.

Maybe. Abl scratched his chin. Might have something to do with the Star.

Is that why it was forbidden to go scavenging this far?

No, that was the Seven Moons request.

Dallion didnt expect such an answer.

The Order has monasteries here? he asked.

Their Order refused to set foot this far north. There was some long understanding with the first emperor that anything north of the capital was to be left alone. That changed throughout the centuries, but theres still a lot. Seeing that theres nothing valuable here, there wasnt any reason to fight the Seven Moons for it.

Is that true? Dallion asked within his domain.

Somewhat, Adzorg replied. The emperor did discourage any exploration in the north, although it was never strictly forbidden. At least for mages. I was never interested in the area myself. There were some scholars interested in the topic, but there were useless academics in many fields.

Can the dragons have been living here? Dallion approached the base of the column.

Doubtful, the Count said. There would have been earlier sightings.

Dragons tend to like being left alone.

Dragons that spawn hundreds of offspring dont.

There was no way to confirm any of the theories. From what Dallion remembered, magic creatures used to exist a lot in past eras. Back when the Purple and Green Moons were visible to all, dragons, cloud creatures, even aether beings were something natural. Even all the way to the dryad era, there were plenty of them in the wilderness, although by that time creatures of pure magic had diminished, giving rise to the magical hybrids.

*Gleam?*

Dallion asked.

The place is empty; the shardfly replied. I wouldn't go here even if I was chased. There's no way a dragon would willingly live here, let alone mate. The south is a lot better.

I'll go in to check, Dallion said and before anyone could stop him, placed his hand on a bare part of the column.

### **AREA AWAKENING**

The familiar green rectangle emerged.

**You are in the land of [SPIRE]**

**The land's destiny cannot be fulfilled.**

Spire? Dallion looked closely at the second rectangle. The name wasn't supposed to be surrounded by brackets.

Thinking back, something similar had happened when defeating the colossus that came to the real world. His achievement had been covered by a layer of darkness that changed the text. Supposedly, that was due to the void that had partially made its way into Dallion's realm, but was that the whole truth? If the colossi were awakened, they could well have means to hide any information on the rectangles, same as mages could do now.

Spark. Dallion tapped on the name of the land.

The moment he did, the rectangle shattered, as was its usual behavior. As far as one could tell, the name had remained unchanged.

That would have been too easy, Giaccia said, emerging a few feet away from Dallion in her nymph form.

It usually is.

Because it's a fragment, she added.

A fragment?

Not all realms shatter once they are destroyed.

That was very true. Dallion had forgotten that the remains of Gleam's home remained in his personal realm long after the whip blade had been shattered. Only when she had returned and the item was restored did the bridge connecting the main piece of land to the Vermillion islands become restored.

The realm is linked to something else, he said, looking around.

In typical colossus fashion, the surrounding realm was a combination of mountains and clouds. The difference was that unlike during his early awakening trials, Dallion was at the foot of a mountain, not on the top of it.

This isnt a pillar, its a building column. The column just isnt here.

The nymph nodded.

Then lets find if the link is still active.

Even with magic and combat splitting, exploring the realm took days. Despite the atmosphere of serenity that was created, there was no getting away from the sense of emptiness. Dallion understood all too well what Gleam meant when she said shed prefer not to live in an area such as this. The ground, the rock, even the clouds and the air emanated lifelessness. They didnt reject Dallions presence as the world of furies had, but rather just refused to interact with him in any way. The only way he could describe it was like living on Mars. Even worse, when night fell, he had to sleep beneath a moonless, starless sky.

Remnants of a link were eventually found, though it had been severed, preventing Dallion from venturing onwards. That didnt stop him from meddling a bit with the cluster of magic threads, though to no avail. What he did manage to discover during his attempts was that the Count was mistakenthe dragons were linked to the ruin. A few strands of magic had somehow gotten entangled with those of the realm link and managed to sustain themselves on its power.

A realm of dragons, Dallion said. Gleam, looks like youll get your wish.