

Leveling up 921

Chapter 921: Tamin III

Facing fifty copyettes in close proximity to the emperor was bad enough. The fact that all of them were overseers went beyond even Dallions expectations. He should have foreseen it! The way in which they could freely move about the city without the fear of leaving any hints was a giant red flag. Being a new domain ruler, Dallion hadn't given the matter much thought, but in retrospect, it was obvious.

For one overseer to be a copyette, all of them had to beat least all the important ones. The time and effort that had been put into this was mind boggling. The Order must have started its plan way back during the first days of the empire, or maybe even before that. The copyette that had impersonated Euryale had put it quite well—they hadn't replaced individuals, but entire families throughout the centuries. And it wasn't the case just here. It likely was the same in all seats of power, at least back when there were other countries. The archbishop really controlled the entire world from behind the scenes.

A vortex of spell circles surrounded one of the overseers—a young woman with long platinum hair tied in a ponytail. The spell was too intricate for any human, bearing the hallmarks of original copyette magic. Pan had already initiated the next step in Dallion's plan—show a copyette for what it was worth. The result was just what anyone would expect.

Aware that the charade was over, all copyettes ignored the invaders and charged straight at the emperor. None of them bothered to keep their humanoid form, taking on the native slime-like appearance of their race.

The imperial guard didn't pause to respond. Although being mere level eighties, they had the equipment and experience to face monsters far greater than themselves. Dozens of combined attacks followed, as half of them clashed with the attackers, while the other half tried to form a living wall around the ruler. The generals also sprung into action, artifact weapons appearing in their hands.

Guard the nobles! Dallion ordered Pan, as four copyettes summoned living armor, becoming twenty-foot-tall embodiments of metalins. One flew up to attack Dallion directly, while three others headed to the emperor and his generals.

Where are the golems when you need them? Dallion burst into instances.

The copyettes must have somehow meddled with the orders given to the constructs for them to remain outside of the arena structure, as if forbidden to approach.

Magic symbols formed on the six-foot-wide blade as the armored copyette thrust it at Dallion engaging in a fierce multi attack. The speed was on par with Dallion, forcing him to fly back as he parried the strikes with his two weapons. Spell circles formed on either side, intensifying the attacks.

Knowing the weakness of his enemy, Dallion summoned the de-manasing spell he had learned during his trial in the Purple Moons realm. Bolts of lightning shot out, draining the magic of everything they touched.

The living armor's sword arm froze, then dropped down once the energy keeping it functional was cut off. That didn't seem to impact the copyettes' fighting capacity one bit. The entire arm was shed

off from the shoulderlike the end of a lizards tail and fell upon the people fighting below. In less than a second, a new metal arm materialized, instantly attaching to the missing spot.

A short distance away, the emperor seemed to be doing a lot better. A ray of destruction, twice as strong as anything Dallon could manage, shot through one of the living armors, evaporating it on the spot. The remaining two attempted to use the death of their companion to finish what they had been sent to do, but before they could even reach the legions generals, an aether sphere formed around the emperor like a shield.

Careful! Dallon shouted as he performed a double spiral attack at the massive armor fighting him. Theyre still overseers!

The warning should have received a lot more credence. Sadly, it wasnt. As the double attack threw the living armor hundreds of feet back in the sky, the emperors protective sphere shattered. It wasnt an attack from the surface that had shattered it, however, but the ground itself. Hundreds of stone spikes had emerged from the ground, piercing the emperors magnificent clothes. The action had shredded more wealth than entire countries had seen throughout their existence.

Dallon had no doubt that every piece of the emperors attire was made in such a fashion to protect him from any and all possible attacks. There probably werent more powerful artifacts in the entire world, but as had been demonstrated multiple times, nothing was infallible. Magic threads containing hundreds of illusion spells were wrapped around each of the spikes, forcing even the extraordinary to become as common as clay. The vast majority had no doubt fizzled out, countered by the clothes effects, but enough hadnt.

TAMIN III

Health: 0%

Traits:

- **AWAKENING 120**

- **BODY 120**

- **MIND 120**

- **REACTION 120**

- **PERCEPTION 120**

- **EMPATHY 120**

- **MAGIC 120**

Skills

- **ATTACK**

- **GUARD**

- **ATHLETICS**

- **ACROBATICS**

- **FORGING**

- **CARVING**

- **ARTS**

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- **SCHOLAR**

- **MUSIC**

- **HERBALISM**

- **ZOOLOGY**

- **SPELLCRAFT**

Weakness: UNKNOWN

A purple rectangle flashed briefly, just enough for Dallion to see that the attack had achieved its purpose. The archbishops plotting had finally succeeded. Or had it? The original plan involved Ablā taking over. The emperor didn't have any direct heirs, so the line of succession didn't matter, not when Ablā was the strongest remaining noble within the empire. While he couldn't measure up to the emperor, once he became ruler, he'd command the same amount of troops and would be the perfect fit for an ally. All that Dallion needed to do was make sure that he survived long enough.

Protect Ablā! he shouted.

A black sphere surrounded the emperor, blocking everything from view. It didn't give off a sensation of void matter. One possibility was that the copyettes were planning to replace him here and now. That could prove more difficult than one might imagine, though. Copyettes could do a lot of things, copying levels greater than their own remained out of reach.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 50%

The living armor sword flew through tens of Dallion's instances, landing in the noble-packed stands. The aether walls that Pan had created merely managed to slow it down, leading to the death of hundreds.

Damn you! Dallion hissed. He wanted to charge at the copyette who had done this, but it was more vital that he keep Ablā alive.

The duke, like all the nobles, was out of commissionscores of magic threads attached to him to power the domains shell. Right now, he was little more than a puppet of a dead puppet master.

REALM RESTORED

Shell integrity 5%

A rectangle flickered before disappearing again. The barrier had been recreated, separating Euryale from events on the ground. That was a good thing, although it also meant she'd be on her own, stopping any potential rockets that rained down from the sky.

Another living armor emerged on the copyettes side. Despite significant losses, the imperial guards had managed to stop the overall copyette advance, slashing the enemys number by half. The generals were also doing a rather good job, five of them taking on a living armor like ants fighting a hornet.

I cant keep this up forever, Pan said, casting protective layer after protective layer on the ground. At present, he was the only thing keeping the Orders copyettes from using the realm of the city as a ball of clay.

The mass of slime on the ground suddenly doubled. Aware that they couldnt win in a direct competition of skill, the creatures were making an attempt to overrun the guards with volume. Each copyette cloned into two, then four, then eight.

Abla! Dallion sent out a targeted music attack, snapping half of the magic threads connecting the noble to the realm.

There was no time to repeat the attack. A living armor was already flying towards Abla, forcing Dallion to engage it mid-flight.

An explosive clash thundered as the two of them slammed into each other.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

The pain passed through Dallions body, barely lingering behind. His opponent suffered significantly worse. The cracklings that had been clinging onto Dallion till now leaped onto the sky silver armor sinking their fangs in. Miniature cracks appeared all over the glistening surface. It didnt end there. In less than a second, the pack merged together, forming the massive body of Nox. Eyes and mouths covered the large black silhouette as the puma bit into the armors neck.

An inhuman scream of terror split the air, as the copyette within the armor was devoured by Dallions familiar. Despite all the cracks seeming shallow, they continued further in, going into the core of the armor. Once they came into contact with the slime, it could be said it was already too late.

The living armor flew up into the air, struggling to shake off the crackling puma, but to no avail.

Good one, Nox! Dallion thought as he hovered an inch from the ground beside Abla.

Abla, he said, slicing through the remaining magic threads with one clean strike. Snap out of it.

The duke blinked, sapience slowly returning to his glance.

The emperors dead, Dallion said, dozens of instances keeping watch in case of other surprise attacks. Can you fight?

Yes Hesitation filled Abblas voice. I dont have my gear. They took it before the ceremony.

Of course they did. Dallion cursed internally. Abblas dragon sword would have come quite handy right now.

Dallion made an arc strike with his aura sword, casting five spells. Most of them covered the duke with large chunks of aether armor. The last summoned his whip blade.

Gleam, take care of him, Dallion handed the weapon to Ablā.

Sure. The shardfly replied in a disappointed voice, then instantly contracted as she was held by the duke.

Who are we fighting? Ablā split into instances, one of them examining the blade he was given. Emanations of doubt emanated from him.

Anything that attacks you, Dallion replied.

A part of the guard cordon collapsed as several copyettes simultaneously expanded, shooting out tentacles of slime in all directions. The attack caused more injury than death, but forced the people to move away in an effort to evade it, creating an opening in the defense.

Damn it! Dallion summoned a clay cylinder.

Alas, there was no position from which to use it. Releasing a ray of destruction would burn through thousands of nobles, continuing on into the city. There was the option of downing another living armor, which was what he ultimately did, scorching a hole that took out half its body.

There was no moment for cheer. Two armors remained, not to mention close to twenty copyettes pouring towards the central part of the structure like a tidal wave. Pan kept on casting spells by the dozen, yet with all the attention focused on him, he was more focused on defense. The wave kept advancing until they reached a legion general.

The man attempted combined athletic, guard, attack, and arts in an attempt to slow the enemys progress, but was quickly overwhelmed. Slime tentacles pierced through him, causing more damage that any person could recover from.

Just then, the black sphere surrounding the emperor exploded. Dozens of purple rays of light blasted out into the open. Not in the least concerned with collateral damage, the rays burned through copyettes and humans alike as well as the arena structure beyond it.

Seeing the threat, Dallion reacted instantly, grabbing Ablā and flying up into the air, where the rays were a lot more sparse.

What the The duke didnt manage to finish his question.

Dallion couldnt say a word, either, staring at a practical impossibility. Below them, in the spot where the black sphere had been, standing on crushed spikes of stone and magic, was the emperor and he didnt seem in the least bit wounded.

Chapter 922: Archduke Gambit

Wed have thought youd have learned by now. The emperor cast a ray of light from his fingers.

The execution of the spell was infantile the way children would do it while pretending to be mages yet also terrifyingly perfect. There were no spell symbols visible, no fluctuations in his magic threads, just a stream of destructive light that pierced copyettes one after the other. There also wasnt an ounce of concern regarding casualties.

Seven copyettes and one living armor remained. All of them were aware that they couldn't win, yet they had no intention of retreating.

Moon vows, Dallion thought. There could be no other force keeping them here.

How many times has it been so far? the emperor asked, while his guards managed to shred another of the slime-beings.

If Dallion wanted to, he could easily deal with the remaining living armor or even lend a hand with the common copyettes, but he chose to remain close to Aba.

Far above, massive lights filled the sky. Explosions so powerful and long-lasting that they took on the appearance of suns coming into existence. Euryale wasn't having an easy time, either. Despite their speed, the rocket bolts had a short range of effect. In order to take out one of the rockets making their way to the capital, they had to strike their targets with extreme precision; a task only fit for a gorgon and one with high enough trait levels to hit targets at great distances. Despite her best efforts, the explosions were getting closer and closer.

Seven, or maybe eight? The emperor mused, then glanced up above him. That must make this nine.

The final living armor thrust through the air, two massive blades pointing forward.

Dallion's instincts took over. There was no doubt in his mind that the emperor could protect himself, yet on a subconscious level he couldn't get the image of the ruler getting skewered out of his mind.

A spiral attack split the air, striking the massive armored suit, sending it up until it hit the domain shell. Caught between two forces, the copyette stood no chance. Alloys that were virtually unbreakable tore and twisted as the armor was flattened against the shell.

Nine, the emperor said. We have to give it to them. They are stubborn. A faint blue aura surrounded the incandescent purple glow coming from the man's very being. Even now, Dallion found it difficult to endure.

That was the reason people viewed Emperor Tamin as an infallible deity, a step away from Moonhood. It wasn't the strength alone, but the man's presence itself mixed with enough music spells to entice anyone into believing what he saw fit. Minutes ago, Dallion had claimed Duchess Elazni to be the greatest music user in the empire. He was wrong. The true greatest was the emperor himself.

You being here must mean that your declaration of war is no longer in effect? The emperor turned towards Dallion.

Uncertainty swept through Dallion's mind. If it came to a fight between the two of them, could he succeed? With a lot of the emperor's artifacts destroyed, there was a chance. To the common eye, the emperor's outfit seemed no different than before, yet any skilled mage would be able to see it was vastly inferior to what it had been before the formation of the black sphere.

I could defeat him, a voice said in the back of Dallion's mind. Nothing was stopping him from doing just that. Aba would still be alive. Not only would Dallion still be able to form an alliance with the Tamin empire, but he would have eliminated one of the three players competing for control of the world.

You're right, he said. If it goes on, we both lose.

We're glad you came to the right conclusion. The balls of light above them kept increasing. Annoying, isn't it? One would have thought that they would have gotten the hint. Although, I must admit replacing my overseers was an interesting move. I'll have to keep it in mind for the future.

Not to mention how it was done, Dallion told himself. Even with the copyettes' abilities and the Order's resources, it wouldn't have been easy. One thing was certain once Dallion returned to his own domain, the first thing he'd do was use the kaleidervisto to confirm that Veil and everyone within his personal realm were really who they said they were.

So, what do we do now? Dallion asked. We can't pretend this didn't happen.

That is where you're wrong. The stage is set. Just because we've had a few last-minute replacements is no reason to abandon the spectacle.

As he spoke, the structure was already in the process of repairing itself. All the blood and bodies were swallowed up, as if they had never existed. With some help of music and limiting echoes, no one would ever remember that anyone had died that day. The casualties would be removed from history or given plausible explanations that had never happened.

We'll miss having the Elazni around, but such is life. The emperor let off a fake sigh. It was a mistake allowing that house to remain in the first place. Now that mistake will be rectified.

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And me?

You, dear Dallion Darude, will be the new archduke of the east, a hero of the empire, vanquisher of dragons, destroyer of nymphs, and our personal close friend.

Dallion felt like vomiting. A few days ago, the man had ordered him killed and now he was pretending as if nothing had happened.

And you won't try to kill me again? Dallion voiced the question.

It wasn't personal. You and Abba were aiming to do the same to us, weren't you Abba? The emperor glanced at the duke.

The noble couldn't help but look away under the pressure of the emperor's voice.

Only one could pass through the gate, but it's always much easier to do so when there's only one opponent. The Order can't be trusted and the nymph empress is unstable. While those two remain, none of us will accomplish anything. Besides, the emperor floated up, moving closer to Dallion, you have a lot fewer forces. If you attack us, we'll suffer a lot, but you'll never be able to recover.

That proved one of the shortest negotiations that Dallion had been part of. The approach was a lot different from that of the void or the archbishop. The emperor had made a proposal, then dared Dallion to refuse it. There was no telling whether that was a provocation or the man really didn't care.

As the explosions in the sky ceased, and the last of the copyettes were killed off, any traces of the event were completely removed. The domain shell was quickly brought down, and the city cast a mass healing spell instead. Anyone wounded or petrified was healed back to their previous state, their memories adjusted to remember nothing of this.

Metalins and bladerers filled the skies once more, as they always had, carrying flags with the imperial crest. Any trace and memory of House Elazni was quickly extinguished. According to all historical records and ancient sagas, the second empress remained, but her progeny failed to produce any male heirs, causing the house to end its existence centuries ago.

An entire new set of overseers was created from the overseer sector, taking on the role of the city's protectors. As for the fallen imperial guards and generals they were replaced by others that were available.

Five minutes after the end of the assassination attempt, Dallion knelt next to Abla, in front of the emperor, while Euryale took a front-row seat, in the section reserved for imperial nobles. Everything proceeded as if it had been planned for years. Only five people remembered the truth of what had happened, and none of them were inclined to share it.

Subjects of the Tamin Empire, the emperor said, while magic devices conveyed images and sound of the events in every settlement within his domain. Duke Abla and Count Dallion have succeeded in destroying the dragon nest close to our borders, earning the title Dragon Killers!

Cheers erupted, although the vast majority of people had no idea of the reason they were cheering. Most outside of the imperial capital weren't even aware of the dragon hunt until moments ago. Now, they felt as if that had been the main topic of conversation for months.

They have proven that we can rest at ease knowing that such heroes wouldn't allow the empire to be threatened by enemies, be they monsters, armies, or dragons.

Another deliberate pause took place, quickly filled with a new wave of cheers.

For this noble deed, we are bestowing the title prince onto Abla, the emperor continued. From this moment on, he is second after us, and the one who will lead our troops to victory over the nymph menace.

Good luck with that.

Dallion couldn't help but pity the duke. It was bad enough that the emperor had made sure that he remembered every detail of the recent events, but had now turned him into a potential scapegoat. The only way to avoid execution was to lead the attack against the nymphs on the front.

As for our close friend, Dallion Darude, we are giving him the title grand archduke of the east something he has long earned when he crushed the nymph invaders.

Grand archduke? Dallion thought. That was a bit over the top. The people seemed to like it. Among the noises of the crowd, Dallion was able to hear his wife being showered with fake compliments from rows of high nobles in her vicinity.

And that is far from all! While wise despite his years, we have chosen to give him a valued advisor to provide counsel when needed.

Internally, Dallion blinked. This hadn't been in the script. The agreement was that the ceremony would be done with quickly, and he could return to his domain. Leave it to the Tamin to sour the deal with a last-minute addition that he knew Dallion couldn't refuse.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion forced a smile on his face.

Another dear friend of mine, the emperor went on. And one with vast experience. A great spellcaster and a former archmage of the Academy.

Adzorg? Dallion thought.

Not in a hundred years did he expect such a turn of events. It was funny how the roles were suddenly reversed. Up until recently, Dallion had used Adzorg to learn what was going on in the imperial capital. Now, the emperor was going to use him to learn what was happening in Alliance; or would have, if the old mage hadn't made a Moon vow not to share information between them.

Don't worry, the emperor said, using the empath voice reserved for guardians. We'll have another good friend to take his place. We just don't have the heart to dispose of your great-grandmother. She's family, after all.

Of course, she is. Who better to use than her to find out about the archbishop's plans?

Despite all the pomp and cheers of the ceremonies. The otherworlder with the glasses remained on Dallion's mind. He couldn't help but feel that the attack wasn't over. The assassination had come far too close to being successful. For someone who prided himself on being able to see the future, it didn't make sense that things would end up there. There had to be some contingency plan that was put into motion. Or was this one big distraction? Destroying the rockets was too easy, even if it was Eury doing it.

It felt weird complaining to be alive, but if Dallion had organized the attack, he would have launched a number of rockets that exceeded the bolts he had constructed. Why hadn't the archbishop done so?

The storm before the calm, Giaccia said from Dallion's domain. The archbishop has always operated in this fashion. He creates the impression that his plans have failed, then waits for the right moment to strike again.

A game of chess lasting centuries, Dallion thought. The question was when his next move would be and who would it be aimed against?

Chapter 923: A Calm Reunion

You keep using too much magic, Onda criticized, though in a far softer manner than usual.

Ever since Dallion had defeated Giaccia in combat and effectively become ruler of a quarter of the world, the hammer guardian had shown him a lot more respect.

Half as much would have worked, he added.

Its not wasted, Dallion said, completing the frame of his crossbow.

With the imperial ceremony over, he and Eury had rushed back to his capital as quickly as possible. The only person who had been faster was Pan. The copyette hadnt even waited for it to start, using a long range teleportation spell to vanish the moment the tide of the fight had decisively turned in their favor.

Since then, Dallion had taken the opportunity to spend some personal time divided between Euryale and crafting while delegating everything else to his closest friends.

SPHERE ITEM CREATED - CRESCENT CROSSBOW

A rectangle emerged. Although all the fragments were yet to be physically connected, the magic threads holding them together fulfilled the requirements of making this a whole item.

After all this time, Dallion had finally created a magic origami item he was pleased with. The knowledge obtained in the grant citadel had proven quite useful, though also caused a feeling of unease to linger within him. This was only a fraction of what the archbishop knew.

As Dallion tightened the magic threads, the elements of the crossbow snapped together, fully completing the weapon. It was massive larger than him in height, capable of shooting four spear-sized bolts in one go. It also had multiple integrated spells, making it capable of shrinking to the size of a flashlight.

Its ready, Lux, Dallion said, wiping off the sweat from his forehead. What do you think?

Threads of blue light emerged all over the crossbow. Even at Dallions level, creating it had proved tiring. Apart from the weapon itself, he had also integrated the caleidervisto within the item.

Thanks, boss! the firebird chirped from within his realm. Theres lots of space!

Coming from Lux, that was a high compliment, although the familiar would have found something positive to say no matter the case.

Have fun getting used to it, Dallion went back to the bellows. Dont break anything.

The crossbow rose up in the air. Multiple segments bent into itself until they took the form of a bladebow, which then flew out of the window.

Thats Lux for you, Pan said from the corner of the forge, still in his human merchant form. Make him a masterpiece that could take any shape and he instantly transforms it into a toy.

Its his home. Dallion cast a spell on the furnace to bring up the heat, then went to gather a new set of metal ingots.

I caught two more. I think thats all of them.

Thats what you said yesterday.

And I was right. These are new ones. I think they came in with the wind as leaves or blades of grass.

Ill talk to Veil about it.

Already done. Hell try following a new pattern.

Dallion nodded. One of the things he had picked up from the archbishop was how to make settlements invisible. It wasn't about the spells, but making sure that the city didn't remain on a single slope. Since then, the overseer had been given the cumbersome task of moving Alliance up and down the eastern coast.

Were things like this when you tried to take over the world? Dallion gathered a generous amount of sun gold ingots along with a bit of Moon platinum. There was a time when he'd struggle to get enough metals of any type. Now, scarcity was no issue.

The faint emotions that emanated from the copyette abruptly ceased.

I can't tell you that, he said.

I'm not asking what you did. Rather how you felt.

And I thought you'd ask something difficult. Pan sighed, then made his way next to Dallion.

The pile of sun gold seemed rather large, prompting him to take one from it.

Things were very different when I had my go, the copyette tossed the ingot in the air, quickly catching it again. No one had done it before, which made it a lot easier at the start and a lot more difficult further on. To be honest, I was more afraid of my allies than my enemies. I was convinced that there was no outer force that could stop me, so I shifted my focus within the empire. After that He waved his hand, still holding the ingot. Well, you know how it ended.

Just like Tamin, Dallion remarked, causing the selected pieces of metal to levitate. Initially, he had wanted to forge the shield the old-fashioned way, but decided to use a bit of magic instead.

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Fingers of both hands moved around the lump of metal, drawing various magic symbols for heat. The motion made him think about Gleam and Ruby. It had been a while since the shardflies had roamed freely in the real world, not that they complained. Gleam was just as content within his realm, and as for Ruby, he was happy to stay close to her.

Did you do what he did? Dallion glanced at Pan.

No. The copyette placed the ingot back on the workbench he had taken it from. But I was considering it. He took a step away.

Do another check, Dallion said. And tell Adzorg to create more illusion barriers. I don't want anyone peeking.

Sure. The copyette shifted to liquid form, trickling out of the room between the tiles on the floor.

In the meantime, Dallion focused on the ball of metal. By this point, all ingots had melted, creating one homogenous whole. Thousands of markers emerged around the molten lump, illustrating what actions one had to take to create the desired form. Dallion had chosen to base his design on the blueprint of an armadillo shield; it was something he was used with and, more importantly, something that Vihrogon would appreciate. Naturally, there would be a few minor adjustments. The shield

would be made strong enough to withstand dragon flames, and also have a far greater freedom of changing form.

Not everything has to shift shape, Onda remarked.

Let an old man have his fun, Dallion said, not cracking a smile. The base form will be as it should.

With the speed of a hummingbirds wings, Dallion adjusted the shape before him. No tools were used, only fingers coated with magic threads. If someone was to see him, they might mistake him for an overgrown dwarf.

Working it like a sculpture, Dallion combined magic, forging, arts, and scholar skills into one. What should have taken days, or at least hours, was achieved in minutes. The level of control was short of Moon-like, maintaining everything from the air currents and overall temperature to the proportions of the materials within every part of the item. The base shape of a shield emerged.

Holding his breath for a moment, Dallion split the whole into an inner and outer section, then divided the outer circle into individual slices. Magic threads were woven in-between each of them like a fine mesh. Then, while the quasi-shield was still molten hot, he cast the portal spell to the banished realms.

A miniature vortex emerged. No larger than a coin, it achieved a direct link through the realms to the place from where one wasnt normally supposed to return.

You certainly took your time. The cheerful voice of Vihrogon echoed in Dallions mind. Here to get me, or just visiting?

I thought you knew me better than I knew myself. Dallion focused on maintaining the vortex. What do you think so far?

About you or the shield? The dryad asked. The shield looks fine. You not so much. Spending your free time tinkering with your toys instead of being with your wife he let out an over-dramatic sigh. I knew this would happen if I left you.

SPHERE ITEM CREATED ARMADIL SHIELD

Surprise and confusion emanated through the vortex.

I know you havent had much experience in this, but the trick is to summon me before the item is fully formed,

the dryad said.

Really? Dallion asked in mock astonishment. With a sharp pull, he moved the vortex away from the shield, placing it in the middle of the room. Then, adding a few additional spell circles, he extended it until it was three feet in diameter.

Green light emanated from the portal, followed moments later by the top of Vihrogons head.

How about this, then? Dallion asked as the rest of the former guardian emerged in the room.

Identical to his form within the realms, with the exception of the ornate battle armor he was wearing, the former sword marshal looked around. He was not one to be at a lack for words, but the

unfolding events made him question whether this was a dream or reality. For several seconds, he stood there, not breaking eye contact with Dallion, as if out of fear that doing so might throw him back into the banished realms.

Having completed its purpose, the portal faded away, vanishing from the real world. Vihrogon, though, remained.

IMPOSSIBLE REUNION

(+5 Empathy, +5 Magic)

You're the first to have brought back a dryad into the real world. Hopefully, you won't regret your action.

You've gotten better at this, the dryad said, reaching out and touching Dallion's shoulder.

I've grown a few levels since last time. Dallion laughed. So, about that shield. He turned around, gently shaking the dryad's hand off. I'm thinking of giving it to Gem, since you won't be able to use it.

Gem? Sure. The dryad remained still in the center of the room. You know what you just did, right? You brought a banished race back to the world.

I'm hardly the first. Besides, it's not like you to get impressed by something I've done.

If I were in a realm, I'd have used a dozen comebacks ready by now. The dryad reached out. Vines emerged from the palm of his hand, reaching all the way up to the ceiling before flowing back in his hand again. I'll need a few minutes.

Never thought I'd render you speechless. Maybe summoning him into the real world like that without warning was a bit sudden. Even so, Dallion needed people more than he needed guardians.

Meanwhile, the armadil shield glowed bright purple. Heading that he'd get a new home had made Gem quickly fill up the new item before Dallion even had a chance to link it to his domain. At some point, he'd have to have a talk with the aether companion about that.

So, how about Dallion began.

Go home, Vihrogon interrupted him.

Huh?

Returning after all this time is a shock, but that's my problem. You have other things to worry about.

What are you talking about?

I know you better than you know yourself, remember? The dryad winked. You've cut all ties with the capital. What you thought was your family there is now gone. That made you think about your other family in this world.

Using his music skills internally, Dallion closed up his emotions. He hadn't expected that Vihrogon would be able to gleam that much. That was a stupid mistake, given that he knew the dryad had the empathy trait.

You kept your promise, so there's nothing keeping you from going there and saying hello. Plus the dryad's expression hardened. I'm sure that you have a few questions for your grandfather.

Dallion had a lot more than a few. The old man wasn't just some minor noble who had annoyed the wrong person; he had been the head of the secret Order and someone who had been admired. Why hadn't he mentioned that before? And what was the real reason for his banishment? Above all, was there anything he could tell Dallion about his grandmother? All these were pertinent questions that Dallion wanted answers to, and now was a good time to get them.

Chapter 924: Moon Vow Breaker

Back when Dallion had set out into the world, it had taken him over a week to reach Nerosal. Now the trip back to his village had lasted mere minutes. In their attempt to get him on their side, the Order had graciously granted Dallion a large slice of the world, including a substantial part of Wetie province. Among that had also been the territory of his native village.

It seemed that each time Dallion went back, both he and the settlement would change. Now was no exception. Once a collection of crumbling huts, now it had become a massive hub to the south. If it hadn't been for the war, there was a good chance that satellite settlements could have cropped up all the way up to the fallen south.

You can take it if you want to, Giaccia said within his awakening realm. If yours now.

While that was true, Dallion preferred not to. It didn't matter that Veil had become his subordinate, and it was only a matter of time before Gloria did the same. In his mind, Dherma remained the one place that was always better left alone.

It's the only way you can guarantee it'll be safe, the harpsword guardian reminded.

Sadly, she was right. Although the Order had deserted the monasteries within his domain, towns and cities were a different matter. Dallion didn't have the numbers or the political backing to follow Tamins example and chase out the order from all his cities. Come to think of it, even the emperor hadn't done that. Only the capital was declared off limits. The provincial capitals had seen no changes.

Maybe later, Dallion said, then cast a spell that teleported him directly to the main plaza.

What the?! A very shiny town guard reached for his weapon at Dallion's sudden materialization.

It wasn't any of the Luro guards Dallion remembered. The man's skin seemed paler than was common for the area. No doubt he had come from the far north, doing what anyone lacking options did go to the frontier.

Everything's alright, Dallion said. His words were filled with enough calm to take down a griffin.

Everyone within earshot paused, looked about confused, as if they had forgotten what they were doing, then went back to their routine as if nothing had happened. As far as they were concerned Dallion was just another tourist coming to see the wonder of the south.

Even the town guard turned to his partner, wondering what he was supposed to do. A sigh from the other someone Dallion hadn't seen before either put an end to the scene. Giving Dallion a glance of apology, the veteran guard continued on, the other hurrying beside him.

That definitely has changed, Dallion thought.

You're a lot better than before, a teenager's voice said.

The change that Dallion saw over his shoulder was a lot greater than anything he'd witnessed so far. He had a suspicion that the voice might be coming from his kid brother, and he was right to a certain degree. The child had transformed into a teenager, almost reaching Dallion in height. Given his athletic frame and developed muscles, one might as well call him a man. Comparable to those of a professional swimmer, they didn't bulge out, but were just enough to let it known that the boy wasn't foreign to hard work.

Lin? Dallion asked, staring at his brother across the plaza.

The boy's hair was long and straight, going down to the middle of his back. The clothes were well-kept adventurer's clothes, suggesting that he had spent more than some time in the wilderness.

You've changed a lot, Dallion said, making his way towards the boy.

Sorry, big brother, Linner said as his brother approached. I can't hear you from that distance.

Dallion felt a sudden pain in his stomach. Concentrating, he focused on the boy in an attempt to see his awakened level. No rectangle appeared. Even after all this time, his brother had failed to awaken.

Damn it!

Dallion thought.

He was fully aware that awakening was by no means guaranteed. Even nobles weren't always able to guarantee their offspring would inherit their gifts. Given Dallion's lineage, he had almost always assumed that sooner or later his brother would gain the gift, as he had. On the other hand, maybe it was better this way. More often than not, late bloomers ended up being otherworlders.

Lin, Dallion repeated, louder this time as he got within twenty feet of his brother. Look at you. You've changed a lot. You're

Just like dad. The other laughed, rushing forward to tackle his brother in a hug.

From Dallion's perspective, the action was painfully slow, but he let it happen. For the first time in his life, he got to experience the pain of having non-awakened relatives. The difference between the two was so great that they could as well be considered different species. And yet, despite all that, he could feel the raw emotion of joy coming from the boy.

You're not here to kidnap anyone, right? Linner asked after letting Dallion go.

Kidnap?

Last time you snuck here, you grabbed Veil and rushed off. People are still talking about it.

Oh, right.

No wonder they were still talking. From their point of view, it was a very recent occurrence. For Dallion years had passed.

You'll stay this time, right?

Thats the plan. Dallion kept on smiling. He didnt have the heart to tell him that at present, he was the ruler of the town and a quarter of the world. Not long, though.

Well, at least its better than last time.

Yeah, better than last time.

What level are you now? Curiosity flowed from Linner like a tidal wave.

High enough. A bit higher than Veil and Gloria.

Oh, did you hear shes a mother now? Everyone expected it, although I thought that you and her would end up getting together. You were so perfect. Remember back when you had just awakened? You used to sneak out on dates with her and everyone had to pretend they didnt know. It was so funny.

That wasnt at all what Dallion remembered. True, his non-awakened self had had a huge crush on the girl, but that had changed after his awakening. The sneaking about was them going to the awakening shrine to secretly boost their levels.

What about you? Dallion asked. Tried to awaken?

Cant, Linner replied without any regret. Mom tried to help me take the first step. Even ask the town cleric, but nothing could be done. Its just not meant to be.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

If you want, I can

No. The boy cut him off. Its not meant to be.

Dallion used his aura vision on the boy once more. His magic threads were thin, as they would be in any non-awakened. Even so, there were a lot fewer of them than there should have been. It was as if the Moons had made it impossible for him to ever awaken.

When I become a Moon, Ill change that, Dallion thought. The notion had come to him effortlessly, as if it were a natural outcome in the future.

Moms at the monastery and Dads tending the fields, but theyll be back for dinner.

Dad still tends the fields? Dallion sounded surprised. Given the family status, there was no need for their father to do that.

I know. He says it makes him happy, so everyone lets him do it.

And grandpa?

Hes fine. There was more than a hint of hesitation in Linners voice. Hes become a bit grumpier, but Im sure hell be glad to see you. Come on, let me show you whats new before dinner!

If Dallion wanted, he could learn every single detail about the town in less than a second. Yet, there was something charming about being led about like a tourist, so he let his brother go on with it. During the tour, he also got the chance to exchange a few words with many of the local area and item guardians. Apart from his old friends, a lot more had propped up. Some of them were surprised an empath had emerged in the settlement. Others were delighted. Now and again, Dallion even

stumbled upon a few banished race guardians, all too eager to learn how he had risen to such heights.

For the first time in a very long while, Dallion felt the innocent excitement he had felt during his first years as an awakened. Compared to the smallness of the world, the town seemed huge, providing surprises behind every corner. That was until it came time for family dinner.

Dallions mother was more than overjoyed to see him, her emotions streaming from her almost as much as her tears. While still frail-looking, she had managed to boost her level to the high fifties, possibly making her the most powerful person in Dherma. Her music skill had also reached its cap, but was a lot gentler than Dallions very similar to Dallions grandmother, according to Giaccia.

Internally, Dallions father was no different from his wife, although he successfully hid it behind a smile and a nod. If Dallion weren't able to see his emotions, one might think that he had welcomed him after a few months absence.

When it came to Kraisten, though, Linner hadn't exaggerated. The old man didn't seem one bit happy to see Dallion return. The way he glared at him made it clear that he suspected Dallions current level, and that only made things worse.

I hear you moved to the imperial capital, Dallions mother said. Apparently, the Order of the Seven Moons had been keeping her well informed. Is it as beautiful as they say?

A sudden burst of pain erupted from Kraisten.

It was beautiful, Dallion said cautiously. I'm not there anymore. I moved east.

East where? his father inquired.

Beyond the forests. Dallion decided it was better not to tell them that the world was a globe. The emperor gave me some land.

That's wonderful. Dallions mother held her mouth with both hands, tearing up with pride yet again. You got to see the emperor himself?

Yes. Dallion instinctively replied. Feeling the anger from his grandfather double, he instantly knew it was a mistake. Just for a bit.

I'm so proud. Now, all you need is to find yourself a good wife. Did you hear that Gloria got married?

Yes, Dallion offered a smile.

It would

What else did the emperor give you? Kraisten suddenly interrupted.

Silence filled the room. Dallions parents glanced at the village elder, then looked back into their plates. Many would have considered it normal if it wasn't for the threads of music that had come out from the old man's mouth and entangled them.

You have music skills as well? Dallion wondered. How come he hadn't seen that before?

Well? His grandfather pressed on.

The normal thing was to laugh it off, but Dallion felt unable to. It wasn't that the old man had been keeping secrets and lying to him all this time. Rather, it was seeing him use his skills on his own children as if they were nothing that struck a nerve.

He gave me your old title. Dallion's eyes met Kraisten's. Along with the entire east.

Do you even know my old title? The old man raised his voice even more. I warned you to be careful, and you still messed up.

At least I learned about my grandmother from him. It took an extraordinary amount of self-control for Dallion not to respond with his own music skills. Unlike you, who's been lying about everything.

Don't pretend you don't know the rules! Kraisten slammed on the table with his fist.

Dallion's mother and father remained perfectly still, like statues, unable to react. Strangely enough, the old man's music had no effect on Linner. The boy sat there, clenching his fists beneath the table, almost praying that everything would blow through. His emotions were so loud that it was obvious that he wanted to break up the argument, but knew that trying to do so would only make things worse.

Why don't you tell me now, then? Dallion found himself incapable of stopping. I know about it, so you should be able to give me the details.

If you had any mind, you'd know not to have anything to do with that jackal! Kraisten shouted straight at him.

Just because you were backstabbed by the Order doesn't mean

Is that what he told you? The rage was so intense that Dallion felt it slam him with the intensity of a hurricane. You think you can reason with him? You can't! Just because there's a war going on doesn't put you in the same boat!

I'm stronger than the emperor. Dallion used all of his self-control to keep himself from shouting.

You're only stronger than his illusion!

KRAISTEN SEENE is breaking a Moon vow!

A yellow rectangle emerged.

He constantly sits safely tucked away and has everyone else do his dirty work! Ever wondered why there are so few otherworlders left in this world? Because he made me kill them!

KRAISTEN SEENE is breaking a Moon vow!

The Order of the Twelve Suns was exclusively for us! There used to be thousands until Jeremy had me kill them!

Jeremy? Dallion wondered. Who the heck is Jeremy?

And that wasn't the reason we were banished! It was because I saw through his fakeness!

KRAISTEN SEENE is breaking a Moon vow!

Faster than Dallion would have believed possible, his grandfather reached over the table and grabbed his sleeve. This wasn't the reaction of a single-digit awakened. Only someone with traits over a hundred should have been capable of such a feat.

The imperial capital never had an emperor! If you really want to see what's he's like, find him and

KRAISTEN SEENE has broken a Moon vow!

KRAISTEN SEENE is removed.

Pale yellow glow surrounded the old man. All other colors quickly faded away until nothing more than a blob of yellow light remained. A split second later, that too vanished.

It would mean a lot if we got to see some grandchildren soon, Dallion's mother said.

Dallion looked around the table. Everyone was behaving as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Even his brother was nothing like what he had been during the argument, hiding a chuckle as he glanced between Dallion and their mother. Stranger still, there was no indication at the dinner table that there ever had been a fifth person there.

Did anyone see that? Dallion asked within his realm.

Would have been simpler if you'd just said you were married, one of his echoes replied, effectively answering Dallion's question.

He was the only witness to what had happened.

Chapter 925: Patched Reality

The imperial capital never had an emperor of all the things that his grandfather had said, that was the one that troubled Dallion the most. It didn't help that the removal had a far greater impact than any banishing or curse he had seen before.

As a rule, any rectangle that was beyond the four basic colors—blue, red, white, and green—was bad news. Purple was an exception, though only available to those who awakened with the gift of magic. Supposedly, they only saw rectangles only in that color their entire existence. In Dallion's case, he had retained his ability to distinguish colors, now seeing that type as well.

There were two additional colors he had seen afterwards: black linked to the void and yellow, which had the tendency to appear only when something went really bad. In this case, the rectangle not only seemed to have ejected his grandfather from reality itself, but also had changed everything relating to his existence. In the minds of everyone, the man had never returned from his trip to Nerosal. It was Aspian Luor who had suffered de-leveling after witnessing his friend be betrayed and killed in the capital. The only thing that had been brought back was Kraistens daughter, whom he had taught how to become an awakened.

It was now clear why no one broke a Moon vow. Those that did were removed from reality along with all traces of them. Quite possibly the archbishop had been inspired by that to create his own brand of banishments and name erasures.

At present, Dallion held two histories in his mind. In some ways it was similar to his Earth and local past that had been with him ever since his awakening; it was also different—much sloppier, as if someone had cut out part of the world and crudely stitched the remaining pieces to make sense. Anyone who could compare the two lines would instantly know. The problem was that other than

Dallion, no one seemed to know better. Everyone from his family to his guardians and personal echoes only knew one historythe current one.

Isnt this fun? Dallion thought. One part of his family had been banished from history, and another had been removed from the world itself.

His stay ended up being a lot shorter than he had planned. When he had come, hed wanted to spend several days at least. Granted, a lot of that time was supposed to have been spent questioning his grandfather about moments of his past that the old man had neglected to mention.

The knowledge that had he spouted out in the final minutes before breaking the Moon vow had made Dallion aware of two things: he was the youngest of the participants in the race for world dominations, and he hadnt mistaken what he had seen back in the battle for the capital. To be sure, he had to check one more thing, and for that, he had to visit Nerosal.

Do you want your old room? Linner asked as Dallion sat in the darkness of the room, staring at the night sky.

This had used to be his grandfathers room. Now, it had belonged to him all along.

Sure, Dallion replied, not turning around.

Youre going to leave again, arent you? his brother asked, sadness emanating from him like a constant whistle.

Ive errands to run, Dallion replied in the most innocent way possible. Ill keep an eye on things here. I wont let anyone harm Dherma.

Just like before, right? Linner sighed.

Yes, just like before. Dallion glanced over his shoulder. Are you sure you dont want to awaken? I know ways that can make it happen.

I know, Linner said. Youre the new archduke, arent you?

Dallion remained silent.

Mom told me. She knows a lot of whats going on in the world, even if she pretends she doesnt. I know a lot as well.

I didnt want to put you in danger. The war Dallion looked back at the sky.

Its the same each time, isnt it? You come here, promise that after you finish what youre doing, youll come back to stay, but you never do.

There are things I need to do, but this time it will be different. When Im done, Ill be able to change the world.

I know you believe it, but is it true? You used to be the laughingstock of the village. The one who desperately tried to awaken for years without success. Everyone considered your awakening a miracle from the Moons.

Except the Luors.

Yeah. The comment made the boy crack a smile. Except some of the Luors. Look what youve become the most powerful noble after the emperor himself, and still you have things you need to finish.

I know it doesnt sound good, Dallion admitted. Listening from the side, he wouldnt believe himself, either. Just have a bit more patience.

His brother shook his head. Dallion could feel that hed never lose the bond between them. What was more, he could feel the pity coming from Linner. The boy remained non-awakened and didnt even care, enjoying his life without qualms or fears. Judging by emotion alone, one would think that he had gone through all the awakening trials, and Dallion was the one tagging behind.

I got married, Dallion said all of a sudden.

For once, this caught his brother by surprise.

When this is over, Ill bring her to Dherma.

Who? the boy asked.

Someone thats been close to me for a very long time. Dallion smirked. In other words, youll see when I get back.

You know Ill hold you to that.

Dallion nodded. There was no point in claiming that hed never let his brother down, because it was no longer true. Once the final race was over, he would.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

See you.

REALM AWAKENING

Dallion returned to his realm.

The sky was colored bright orange, despite morning just having started. Shining brightly, next to his skill pillars, the massive half-heart Moonstone filled the air with divine energy. Even after using a substantial part of it, enough remained for Dallion to add another gem to his Moon emblem, as well as a few more things. Sadly, it was too early to resort to that there was a real chance that he might need it urgently in the very near future.

Dallions fingers moved, casting an eight-circle spell. Once he was done, a large sphere emerged in front of him.

Harp, Dallion said, sculpting the sphere into a globe with his current knowledge of the worlds maps. How much of the seas do you know?

The nymph emerged a step away, wearing the fine water dress she preferred when playing her harp in his realm.

I know the ocean and most of the coasts, she replied. But that was a long time ago.

Describe what you know.

Going by memory, Dallion recreated everything he knew of the main continent, ranging from the fallen south to the forbidden north. There were a number of blank areas, but on this scale, the map seemed a lot more complete than not. The entire empire was there, as well as a few of the former neighboring countries. Dallion made a point to add the dwarf kingdoms to the west, the giant forests of the east, and the Stars former stronghold beyond them.

Giaccia helped by detailing the entire ocean, coasts included, and a few of the large rivers going inland. Dallions other guardians and familiars join in, adding what they could until soon enough, the first fully complete world globe floated before them. Even Adzorg joined in through his linking echo.

FULL GLOBE

(+1 Perception)

Youre the second person created this since the start of this age. Worth a point, it seems.

How kind of you, Dallion thought as he waved the achievement rectangle away.

Any reason you created this, dear boy? Adzorg inquired. Its a rather fascinating achievement, but there are a lot more detailed maps for everything of importance.

How far has the order spread? Dallion asked.

Thats The old mage paused. Thats a rather good question, actually. I suppose no one knows for certain. We know that they havent set foot in the fallen south, he said. Or the forbidden north.

Do we?

The south seemed to have been abandoned, after the destruction of the eternal city, but the archbishop still had scrolls describing buildings and technology found there. Maybe it was more than the Stars abandoned playground?

Theres no reason to think otherwise. Anything else is guesswork.

Youre very right, Dallion said, glancing at the eastern coast of the continent. It was a safe bet that the entire area was known by the Order in one way or another. Maybe the northern bits were unexplored, but there were more than enough monasteries south to suggest that expeditions had taken place there. To know for certain, well have to stop guessing.

Surrounding himself with a bubble of reality, Dallion left his realm, venturing back into his real world domain. Like a glass marble, he rolled through the section of wilderness under his influence, making it all the way to the city of Nerosal. This wasnt just a casual visit, though. Concentrating further, Dallion moved to the Orders citadel in the city.

The archbishop had been clever enough to leave several presences there in the form of domain bubbles surrounding the shrines and citadels. Dallion was able to see the foreign bubbles clearly, as well as the threads linking them to the vast network of monasteries and other domains throughout the world. Severing each and everyone off would take an impressive amount of effort. For the moment, he only needed to isolate one.

Floating up to the domain bubble he wanted, Dallion summoned his harpissword.

If you do this, you'll be declaring war to the Order, Giaccia warned.

We already are at war, Dallion said, striking at the barely visible thread that went out of the bubble and stretched to infinity through the sea of wilderness.

REALM INVASION

A rectangle emerged as the blade struck the thread. Apparently, severing off part of a realm wasn't as simple as Dallion initially expected.

No, you don't! he hissed, infusing the harpsisword with spark and Moon magic threads.

Holding the weapon with both hands, he swung once more, striking the thread with a full line attack. Sparks flickered all over the point of contact.

CONNECTION SEVERED

A new rectangle formed. The bubble within Dallion's domain shattered, dissolving like ice on a hot summer day.

Dallion didn't waste a moment, venturing into the realm of the structure. Now that he had obtained full control over it, he could tell exactly where everything was, both in the real world and in the awakened realm. Thus, he ventured directly to the bishop's chamber.

Hello, Cleric. Dallion emerged near the desk, before the occupant of the room could react. Threads of music connected to the unfortunate person, preventing him from twitching a muscle. Stay still, Dallion ordered. To be on the safe side, he also cast a series of binding spells, surrounding the bishop in several spheres of aether.

I didn't expect you so soon, the other replied. On the outside, he still resembled the albino that Dallion had met years ago. Yet, both of them knew that to be nothing more than a disguise. The real bishop was just another of the archbishops copyettes placed to play the role of bishop to the world. I never doubted you'd come, though.

Lucky me. Dallion cast another quick spell to dissolve the massive desk in the room.

For what it's worth, I didn't approve of you being killed. It was all for the greater good.

Isn't it always?

The emperor's too dangerous. If he's let unchecked, the world will

The emperor wasn't in the capital, Dallion interrupted.

The determination with which the statement was made caused surprise to leak from the albino. The copyette quickly tried to block it, but it was already too late.

You didn't know, did you? Dallion laughed. You've been serving him for Moons know how long and you never knew.

The emperor was there. Cleric insisted.

Sure. I'm not here for that. I just want to learn how far the Order has spread throughout the world. Dallion mixed magic with music skills. And you're going to tell me the location of every last one.

Chapter 926: Saint of the Order

In every high-level awakened's life, there were times when it was easy to succumb to the temptation of being overly eager to get results. The world was full of various methods of making extracting information a lot faster and easier. When it came to music, not even pain was involved. With enough practice, one could make the target of the interrogation willingly share every last detail and even be grateful for it. And that was without mixing it with magic.

When it came to Dallion, he was careful not to abuse such methods. For one thing, he didn't want a repeat of what had happened during his battle of the Star. Back then, thousands of birds, animals, and insects had been sacrificed in order to grant him an advantage in combat. It had served him well, though it was also a reason for the void's effect on him to grow. The void had been purged for some time now, but the lesson had remained with Dallion for life.

The information is useless, the copyette said, still maintaining Cleric's appearance. The archbishop will see things before you do them.

He doesn't seem to have seen this.

Hasn't he? Cleric smirked.

Why didn't you go north or south? Dallion pressed on, using his music skills to directly affect the copyette's thoughts. Combining it with magic allowed the music to come into contact directly with the being's subconscious.

The north was out of bounds, Cleric said. The archbishop sent scouts to the south every hundred years or so, but we never stayed. I think it holds too many painful memories.

How old are you?

We're all the same age. Just as your emperor.

When were you unbanished? Dallion clarified.

It's been a while. After the fall of the dyads. There are many a lot older than me, but I'm old enough to remember the rise of the empire.

That put him at about a thousand years old. Quite a lot, everything considered. But given some of the other players, he was no more than a newborn pup.

How come you didn't cover the globe in all that time?

It was never our goal to cover the globe. Citadel and monasteries were only built where they were needed. We started expanding three hundred years ago.

Why?

In response to the empire. As it gained strength, so did others. The archbishop knew that it was only a matter of time before all powers became concentrated in a few rulers. And he was right.

The explanation was very well thought out and definitely logical, but it was also a complete lie. Even the copyette suspected so. Dallion could tell by the emotional fluctuations floating within Cleric's body like tiny bubbles. There was another reason that had pushed the archbishop into sending off his Order to roam the world; possibly the same that made him start moving his island throughout the ocean.

And yet you never went north, Dallion noted.

North was not our concern. The west was.

That was true. Based on everything Cleric has said so far, the progress to the nest had been the most cumbersome of all. With most of the non-human races there, the Order had a much more difficult time establishing a local presence. While they wholeheartedly accepted any person willing to join, awakened or not, the non-human races remained cautious, only joining in exceedingly small numbers. Gorgons, furies, and even dwarves were more likely to avoid monasteries, let alone shrines and citadels. It didn't help that their awakening rate was far less than that of humans, so they couldn't even use the services of awakening altars.

Dallion looked at the aether globe of the world. There were several large land patches not occupied by the order.

What about the ocean?

There never was any concern with that, the copyette replied.

Even now?

Even now.

It seemed that there was some sort of arrangement between Tiallia and the archbishop. Maybe she was still indebted to him for the advice he had provided millennia ago. Then again, the Order was in an unspoken arrangement with each of the other three major players. Even Dallion hadn't gone into an all-out war, although there was no telling whether that would change in the near future. He knew better than anyone that he was only one alliance away from getting attacked from all sides.

You should have joined the order when I offered, Cleric said, correctly interpreting Dallion's silence as the end of the interrogation. It would have been a lot better for everyone, yourself included.

Maybe. Dallion ended the spell binding the copyette. But then, I would never have married.

Dallion glanced at the door. There were fifty-seven other members of the Order within the citadel. No doubt all of them had felt the shift of the domain. There was a good chance a few of them might try something radical.

You can have your shrine back. Dallion stopped using his music skills. Tell the archbishop to move them out of my domain if he wants to remain on the sidelines.

That was it? Cleric appeared confused.

You told me everything I needed to know. Everything else depends on his reaction.

I'd tell you you're playing a dangerous game, but you already know that.

At what point does it stop being a game? Dallion asked, and ventured back into the awakening realm of the Nerosal.

AREA AWAKENING

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Veil, he said, aware there was a good chance the archbishop was listening in. Tell everyone to be at the ready.

What did you do this time? The overseer sighed.

Nothing for now, but if what Im thinking is correct, theres a chance rockets will start flying down soon.

Rockets There was a time when the only thing I was worried was being swallowed by the Star or some chainling. Youve brought danger to a whole new level.

Beats hunting boars, right?

Very funny. The prolonged pause suggested that Veil was more amused than he wanted to let on. Ill tell Eury and let har handle things. Anything else?

No. Yeah.

At that stage already? I guess it comes with married life.

Tell her not to worry. Ill be back soon. Of course, that was as long as everything worked out fine.

Dallion floated through the wilderness until he reached the edge of his domain. Then, he returned to the real world and continued on west, flying.

The number of cloud forts in the area had significantly increased, most of them crimson. With the nymphs retaking the coast from the Alliance of Stone and Steal, it was normal for there to be a gathering of troops on the new boundaries. Yet, even so, there were a few no-man zones that neither side showed interest in. Those were deserts and mountainous terrains that made even the standard barren wilderness feel welcoming.

While flying, Dallion carefully examined the terrain below, searching for magic anomalies: vortexes, magic thread clusters, spots without magic altogether. Everything seemed as it should be well, almost everything. The magic at the vortex fields remained in flux. It wasnt enough to cause any harm, but the magic threads remained in constant flux, attaching and detaching at random, as if they were living beings. If a rogue mage wished to hide from the Academy, this would be the perfect spot.

Gleam, Dallion summoned the spectral shardfly. Feel any illusions.

No, but there could be a city here and I still wouldnt be able to say for certain.

That bad?

Again, it depends. I might get lucky, but after what you pulled off, it would be decades before the place settled down.

The shardfly fluttered closer to the ground. *Searching for anything particular?*

If a magic rocket hit here, how long would the magic take to settle? Dallion wondered.

Depends on the mess it causes.

The fallen south had been hit by something powerful, and despite the chaos, the terrain had recovered. Dallion hadnt been there recently, definitely not since his awakened and magic levels were boosted to their current states. Still, he doubted that was the place he was searching for. The Order had been keeping an eye on it, if Cleric was to be believed. Yet, there was one spot that

Dallion knew of, which had suffered almost as much, a place that remained uninhabited to this day, whose name was enough to terrify anyone aware of the destructive power of large magic rockets the Glass Mounts.

The surrounding area had been sparsely populated way back when Dallion had visited the place as a junior hunter. Now, it was completely deserted. War and fear had driven the local inhabitants to seek shelter elsewhere, and fail to find it by the looks of it. Trade routes that used to be full of caravans had remained unused for months, while the monsters of the wilderness had vastly increased. None of them dared take on Dallion at his current level. Even from the air he could sense them run and hide. There was one structure among the vastness of glass that had remained very much unchanged the lodgings of the retired dwarf hunter.

Out of caution, Dallion landed several miles from the structure.

Freezing winds blew, having no effect on him whatsoever. A thick mesh of magic threads had already covered him, protecting him from any temperature fluctuations. That wasn't the reason that Dallion had done it, though. The layer of protection was meant exclusively for combat.

Gripping the hilt of his harpsword tightly, he slowly made his way towards the glass building. As he got within twenty feet, the door swung open, just as it had back when he, Jiroh, and Euryale had approached. Back then, they were seeking information regarding the furys home the cloud bastion. This time, the question would be of a very different nature.

I knew you'd be back, the dwarf said, all traces of his previous accent gone.

Dallion could now see layers of illusion magic covering none other than a human. The complexity far exceeded anything Dallion had seen even back at the Academy. There could be little doubt that this was the doing of humanity's greatest mage, possibly rivaling Tiallia in skills. What was more, a thin layer of shimmering light also surrounded the man he was an otherworlder.

Took you a lot longer than I thought, the man slid a finger along his chest, ripping away the many layers of illusion. The new person was remarkably average. Dark-haired with dull brown eyes, and a face with sharp features that could be defined as handsome, though not exceptional, the man gave off the vibes of an influencer. At six-foot-two, he was a lot shorter than the image of the Tamin Emperor, wearing simple, though comfortable hunter clothes. Each of them had been leveled up to the absolute limit, though retaining their original material.

JEREMY LAYNE

Traits

- AWAKENING: 132

- BODY: 107

- MIND: 98

- REACTION: 111

- PERCEPTION: 108

- EMPATHY: 37

- MAGIC: 186

Sills:

- **ATTACK: 100**
- **GUARD: 100**
- **ACROBATICS: 100**
- **ATHLETICS: 100**
- **FORGING: 100**
- **ARTS: 100**
- **CARVING: 100**
- **SCHOLAR: 100**
- **MUSIC: 100**
- **HERBALISM: 100**
- **ZOOLOGY: 100**
- **SPELLCRAFT: 100**

Jeremy, Dallion whispered.

Saint Jeremy, the other corrected. But I believe that was long before your time, back when the Order meant a thing. Its annoying how fast things get corrupted. Give it a few centuries and even the best ideals get bent.

You left an aether echo running the empire all this time.

The unusual aether glow, the reason he spent so much time isolated, even the impossible feats the entity in the capital had achieved, could be explained with this. Adzorgs claim that the emperor had managed to escape a prison item in seconds was utterly false. The emperor had done nothing of the sort. He had simply ended the existence of the echo within the realm and created a new one in the real world again. Everything else was smoke and mirrors.

The only way I could be certain that my orders would be followed. Of course, the last one had gotten a bit rebellious. All of them do at one point or another. I guess all that power that I put in goes to their head. Thats why I have to replace them every so often.

Who knows?

Other than you and Simon? Jeremy scratched his chin. A few might suspect, but only Alien knows for certain. When I found him, I still believed that Earthlings could fix the problems of this world. Now I know that they cant. Only a Moon has that power, and each era can only have one Moon.

Dallion stood there, saying nothing.

Afraid I might kill you? Jeremy smiled.

You wont. Dallion chased out any thoughts of fear from his consciousness. You dont want to risk anyone finding the real you.

The smile on the others face quickly disappeared.

Chapter 927: Fire from the Sky

You think Im afraid of that addict? Jeremy snapped. Simon would prefer to stay on top of this piece of shit than dare change the status quo. And its not even about changing the world. Even back when we met, he had pumped himself with so many Moonstones that he couldnt think straight. Kept on going on and on that cleansing the world, yet was the first to form a pact with the void when things didnt go his way.

Clearly, there was a lot of bad blood between the archbishop and the real Tamin emperor. If there was one thing that the two of them had been honest about was their vision of the world. The archbishop really wanted to keep the world as it was, with some corrections here and there, while Taminor rather Jeremy wanted to become a Moon for the sole purpose of changing it.

You really want to kill me. Jeremy changed the topic again, looking at Dallions harpsisword. And with my wifes weapon.

The comment sent shivers down Dallions spine.

Your wife?

You think youre the only one who got married? Jeremy shook his head. All of us go through the love bug. Well, maybe not Simon. The nine-thousand-year-old virgin. A lot of spite was put into the last words. The second empress was the love of my life. For a brief moment, I thought that having a family was possible, but in the end she refused to join me in eternity. And my ungrateful brats set off to destroy everything I had built. Having aether echoes is a lot more practical.

Its different.

No, it isnt. Theres no denying that youve become a pretender, but you remain a kid and a slow learner. You should have noticed that youre the only one who does things in person. Simon has his copyettes and fanatics, the nymph empress has her symbiont echoes, and I have the seven-foot epitome of brilliance that sits on my throne. In the meantime, you rush from place to place like a ping-pong ball, thinking that it actually makes a difference. You saw my echo get killed in that last attack. Did anyone notice?

Slowly, Dallion shook his head.

They can kill it off a thousand times and all I have to do is replace it. But what if I kill you here and now? Who will replace you?

Dallion instantly summoned his aura blade and slashed the air around him. Several layers of aether barriers emerged around him.

So much for trusting your own convictions, Jeremy said, calmer than was normal.

You tried to kill me, Dallion floated several feet up in the air. And Im not the first one.

Dal, until recently, you werent even significant enough to waste my time on. The whole reason you started me when you came here last was because you brought two more otherworlders with you. We attract each other. If Simon could have noticed, the war would have started sooner, and I still had a bit of cleaning to do until then.

Thats why you helped Jiroh leave this world.

Either that or get her killed. Katka failed dramatically in that, but she never was particularly skilled.

Jeremy cast a quick spell, creating a chair of marble to emerge from the ground next to him. In a casual, almost nonchalant fashion, he sat down, not in the least bit concerned with Dallions spells or weapons. After all, the difference in levels wasnt that great, and it remained in the emperors favor.

Say, do you know what caused all this? The man looked around. Its said that this used to be the capital of a rather strong kingdom before my time. Every memory of its existence is now banished, along with everyone that lived here. Thats what Sumon does when one of his saints does anything that doesnt fall within his so-called prophecies.

The emperor reached in the air, where a crystal cup full of bear emerged. It smelled slightly sour, as if someone had tried to recreate a brand from Earth, but never quite managed to do so.

One of my predecessors, he continued. I dont know his name or anything about him, just that he challenged Simon before he was ready for it. He took a sip. Or she, he added. At this point, nothing is certain. The addict made a note to let me know that there had been three saints so far, all of them swaying from their path. If you and your gorgon hadnt stepped in, the great imperial capital would have become something like this.

All the expeditions of the Order were just to find you.

Maybe youre not that slow, after all.

And the Shimmering Circle was meant to find him.

Wrong. I knew exactly where he was. Ive been to the Grand Citadel many times. Their task was to find his source of Moonstones. And partially thanks to you, its no longer an issue.

The Dragon hunt Dallion thought. Not the one that had happened a week ago, but the ones Shimmering Circle had been doing for decades. When Katka had killed the dragon in the eastern forests, leaving it to turn into a dragon shadow, Dallion thought that she wasnt interested in the particular skill gem it had dropped off. The truth was that she wasnt interested in any type of skill gem. Her task was to find Moonstones. The nest up north wasnt just a nest.

One of Simons farms. Hes aware that the Moons disapprove of the practice, but does it anyway. Now that hes cut off, hell start destroying awakening altars.

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No way.

Youre certain? A wicked grin formed on Jeremys face. Hes addicted. Youve used quite a bit of them lately as well, havent you? Tell me that anything can beat the sensationthe power and understanding that they bring. Its like jumping twenty levels. Take enough of them and for a brief moment you almost feel like a Moon.

While the emperor was talking, Dallion played out combat scenarios in his mind. Jeremy was a far greater mage, which meant that hed have to exclusively rely on spark attacks. The greatest issue wasnt the difference in skill or levels, however. It was the complete lack of information regarding the mans true form. The little he had gathered so far was only valid of the aether echo, and while it

could be argued that echoes retain some of the qualities of their original, the difference in appearance put that to doubt.

There were so many things Dallion had yet to learn. Ironically, that was also his greatest advantage. As the youngest pretender for the world, he still had plenty of memories from Earth. Simon, Jeremy, Tiallia, even Pan had been in this world so long that they had started acting like the locals. As powerful as their spells, actions, and even technology was, it was just more of the same. At some point in the distant past, it probably had been mind-shattering. Now, all but echoes of that greatness and imagination remained stuck in scrolls within the grand citadel.

Ill make you a deal, Jeremy said. Help me reach the sixth gate and Ill make you my second.

You made a deal with my grandfather, Dallion hissed.

Young Krai?

Dallion felt a mental push. Could it be that the emperor remembered?

He showed so much promise. Jeremy sighed, unsummoning his glass. And threw it all away to chase skirts.

You made him kill your Order.

For once, youre right. Yes, I made him do that, and he agreed. It wouldnt have mattered either way. Sometimes the fastest way to reach the top is to eliminate the competition.

Ill take you down.

Still cant say kill? Jeremy laughed. Thats the problem with you empathsthe way you go out of your way to handicap yourselves. There isnt a person in this world that can take me down. Least of all you.

Its not about you, its about your domains. The only way for Dallion to succeed would be to go all out from the start, combining spiral spark attacks, magic music attacks, and use every aether echo he had in store. At the very least, that would force the emperor to react and reveal some of his skills.

Ah, one of the Moon fables. Jeremy stood up, the crystal throne sinking into the ground as it did. Does that mean youre breaking our alliance?

Yes. Dallion replied without doubt or hesitation.

So, you really came to kill me?

Several miles away, the ground cracked. Streams of vaporized glass shot up through the cracks before the whole area shattered, allowing for a dragon to rise up. Covered in scales of gold, it resembled a mix between a wyvern and an ancient dragon with an extremely thin neck and prolonged neck. Enormous wings made up for it, glistening with magic. As the creature let out a shrieking roar, seemingly causing the entire mountain to vibrate, thousands of eyes appeared on its wings and body.

Great Dragon Aurum, Dallion thought. He remembered seeing pictures of it while studying at the Academys Learning Hall. It was said to have belonged to

emperor Tamin the first. Dallion should have made a note that nowhere was it mentioned what had happened to the creature.

Go right ahead. Jeremy crossed his arms. You're not the only one with companion familiars.

Before the emperor had finished talking, Dallion burst into two hundred instances and summoned all his clay cylinders. All of his aether echoes emerged, while three rays of destruction simultaneously were unleashed, targeting Jeremy and the dragon.

A bubble of liquid aether surrounded the emperor, having the ray to bounce off and melt a large crater beneath. Jeremy, of course, didn't move, staying in the air as if the ground remained beneath his feet.

The remaining two rays hit the golden dragon, thrusting it back. The lack of rectangles quickly told Dallion that no actual damage had been dealt.

A minuscule window of opportunity was presented. With the dragon gone, Dallion had an opportunity to attack the emperor directly. Mages were, in general, weak when it came to hand-to-hand combat. Jeremys stats were high, but there was a good chance he'd become dull throughout the years. Was it worth the risk, though?

Half of Dallions instances swooped down, darting straight at their target. The rest cast spark infused spiral attacks.

Aether swords emerged from the emperors bubble, shooting out in all directions. It was a classic spell, lethal, perfectly executed, though incredibly dated. Adzorg probably had read about it back when he was a novice. That didn't make it any less dangerous, but it confirmed Dallions suspicion the emperor had lost his imagination.

Hey! Dallion shouted in his realm. I know you're listening! Jeremy is at the Glass Mounts.

All of his instances faded, just for long enough for him to cast a purple ray of light aimed up. Once done, he combat split again.

If you want to get him, hit my beacon! Dall flew away as fast as he could.

Mentally he had readied himself for a forced splitting, but neither the emperor nor the archbishop resorted to that. Instead, one of Dallions instances spotted a series of twinkles in the sky.

Rockets, he thought.

Whatever method the archbishop was using to launch them, it was vastly superior to anything Dallion knew. It wasn't instant teleportation, but it was damned close.

Jeremys dragon reacted. Flying faster than an arrow, it positioned itself between the emperor and the descending rockets, then let out a breath of fire towards the sky.

The higher the flame got, the larger its area became, like a reverse cone.

Rockets hit the fire, busting into majestic balls of light. Unlike the display over the capital, these were considerably closer to the point that the dragon was violently pushed back down. Dallion himself felt the strength of the blast as it pushed him further away.

MODERATE WOUND

GREAT DRAGON AURUMs health has been reduced by 20%

A single purple rectangle flashed in the distance.

More blasts followed, covering the landscape like falling suns as they reduced the Glass Mounts to a crater capable of swallowing cities. The battle of conquest had officially begun. From this moment onwards all four powers were on their own.

Chapter 928: Plans and Allies

More blasts echoed, transforming an already devastated part of the world into something far worse. Each time a pulse of energy was let out, moving faster than sound, shoved Dallion further forward. He constantly maintained multiple aether barriers, yet had to be impressed both by the rockets destructive force and Euryales skill. Back in the Tamin capital, he had assumed that the entire plan was for the rockets to release their energy through the domes shell and let everyone inside cook like in a microwave. The demonstration just now only confirmed his suspicion that the archbishop had lost every ounce of imagination and was relying on brute strength and technological superiority.

Good thing you kept Alliance moving, Giaccia said.

I might have to do the same for all other settlements. Did anything of the sort happen during your time?

Yes, but not on that scale. We had lots of devices that were capable of mass destruction. Tiallia restored a lot of devastating spells and created new ones. I just fought.

Splitting again, Dallion used a few instances to glance over his shoulder. Most of the city size fireballs had faded away. The destruction was impressive, erasing a large part of a mountain chain, but hadnt created a crater or depression. Even after everything, this couldnt hold a flame to the destruction the fallen south had been through.

Thats the power Dallion had to contend with, and in order to succeed, he had to become more creative. Above all, his immediate problem was a lack of troops. Quality only trumped quantity in small amounts. There was no doubt that Dallion, or any of the four pretenders, could annihilate armies of low-level awakened, he couldnt be everywhere at once. Plus, inhabitants were the only way through which domain rulers leveled up. He could kill everyone else on the planet and hed still be unable to raise his level to more than it was now.

Veil, move all my settlements, Dallion ordered through his personal realm. Have them be in constant motion all the time. And dont tell me anything important! All awakened realms are being spied on.

Right, the overseer responded without adding anything else. He didnt have to.

Dallion could feel the unease emanating from all inhabitants of his personal realm, spreading to everything they were connected to. The archbishops attack, though Dallion, had brought alarm to millions of people, causing them to feel anxious without even knowing why.

As Adzorg used to say in the past, life was a series of realizations brought on by external events. In this case, Dallion realized that the paranoia he had developed as a noble and domain ruler was not enough to prepare him for the real picture. The only silver lining was that the revelation had been made at someone else's expense.

You really showed your fangs, Simon, Dallion thought.

Based on the number of rockets and the strength of the blast, it was safe to say that he had been aiming for both of them. No doubt he had used his prophecy skill to get the best outcome or had he? Jeremy claimed that the archbishop was addicted to Moonstones. Could those be the source of his visions? If so, no wonder that the emperor had spent decades systemically limiting his supply. Assuming it was mostly gone, the visions would no doubt lose their accuracy. And that gave Dallion an opportunity.

Increasing his speed to the point that spells allowed, Dallion split the sky, flying straight for the nearest settlement he was in control of. From there, it would be an instant to return to Alliance, where the real war would start.

Suddenly, a dot formed just above the horizon. From this distance, even Dallion's perception made it impossible to reveal many details. The only certainty he had was that it was far too large for a human.

Is that another trump card, Simon? Dallion slashed the air with his aura sword, casting a series of defensive and aggressive spells. A few moments later, though, he relaxed, causing them to vanish. The dot was someone he knew well. Rather, it was two entities he knew well.

The two points flew at each other at full speed. At the moment they were ten feet from each other, both stopped, the already built inertia continuing on like a gust of storm winds.

Dal! Eury said, anger and relief bleeding through, as they were too powerful for even blocker items to contain.

The gorgon had come in full battler armor riding Dark, not to mention the crossbows and rocket bolt crates attacked via spell to the dragon's body.

Im fine, he replied quickly. Im alive.

You're an idiot! The snakes on the gorgon's head couldn't stop twirling. Even the sun gold armor she was wearing seemed to have its surface bubbling. No one takes on the emperor on his own turf.

You can say that again. Dallion glanced behind. There were no visible signs that anything of significance had taken place in the west. It was safe to say that the inhabitants of the few settlements that witnessed the explosions had already been made to forget the entire thing. You got Dark to show up, he remarked.

It was funny how a stupid remark could convey so much. While the dragon was profoundly confused, nothing else needed to be said between Dallion and Euryale. All alliances between the four pretenders were a temporary illusion that shifted at the drop of a hat. In order to survive, Dallion had to win, and Euryale intended to be with him every step of the way.

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The immediate thing to happen was for Dallion to return to his capital. Several changes to the domain were made. In addition to the kaleidervistos and rocket crossbows that had become a permanent part of every settlement, he had summoned all his close friends in his first war council. Many of them had helped him out back when he was a no-name newbie, barely passed his first gate. Others had been taught and trained by him. No matter the case, he needed all their advice right now.

The empires the greatest force, Hannah said. But they're also the most vulnerable. The Order and the nymphs have troops scattered throughout their domains.

Removing the Order from your territory is a must, Adzorg added, nodding as he spoke. While they're still there, it doesn't matter how much you move your settlements, they'll always know.

We start a war against the Order? Diroh asked. Necessity had made her grow into the role of fury leader. If in the past, they revered her as the races legitimate princess. The last series of events had taught her how to be a ruler as well thanks, in large, to Hannah and March.

Hell just move all of his domain, leaving their buildings behind, Euryale explained. It won't be a huge loss. They've already started destroying the awakening altars rather than lose them.

Dallion knew that wasn't the reason, though. The emperor had been right. The archbishops supply must have severely dwindled for him to resort to this. With luck, his prophecies wouldn't be an issue in the near future.

That leaves raw strength, Hannah continued. Let's face it. Right now, you're the weakest in terms of armies and level.

Ouch, Dallion thought. The former innkeepers attitude hadn't changed one bit. She was still blunt and direct as a brick to the teeth.

You'll need to act fast and make the most of while you have the chance. If history is any reference, you won't get a chance to level up after that till the very end of the war.

Pan? Dallion turned to the copyette, who in typical fashion had created multiple of himself ranging from the war room to the kitchen.

Yes. Don't expect to gain any levels when the fighting starts, he agreed. You'll be lucky to catch up to your current level. And don't try to compensate by building cities. It has been tried and didn't work out well.

Then conquest it is. Dallion cast a spell, causing an aether globe of the world to appear above the table. Well start with Wetie Province and the south. Those should be easy targets. Not to mention that he already had made arrangements with Falkner. After that, I take the wilderness west that no one wants and the north.

Level boost. Hannah crossed her arms.

If we're aiming for a level boost, we might as well focus on that.

Everyone was aware that Dallion wouldn't be able to keep on to the territory, but thanks to the initial gains, he'd gain several levels, possibly putting him on par level-wise with the other pretenders.

Also, it would break the current status quo, forcing them to move troops around, and since this was a free for all, the movements might well spart conflicts between his enemies in the process.

After that, we flush the Order out of the eastern forests, Dallion went on. If were lucky, that would make the empire do the same, leaving the archbishop alone on his island.

It will invite Tiallia to attack, Giaccia remarked. The nymph had joined the war council in her human form, as had many of Dallions guardians and companions. Some were by far more active than others, but all were listening intently. When she sees you fighting the Order, shell send her water islands and attempt to gain a foothold.

Do you think shell come in person?

All eyes fell on the nymph.

No. Tiallia never liked to fight in person. Shell send someone else, or use water golems. Now that she has seen both the emperor and the archbishop use rockets, shell remain beneath the ocean, directing things from there.

Then well take on a hit-and-run approach, Dallion suggested. Small strong teams that take out a monastery at a time. The archbishop doesnt leave his island, so he wont meddle. What do you think?

People started discussing the details. There were discussions whether to use magic troops, how to plan the initial conquest, then the battles with the Order of the Seven Moons. Key strategic locations were discussed along with numbers and the methods needed to maintain them should any of the enemies attack. The coasts were viewed as fairly safe, as opposed to the ones on the continent. While most of the empires attention was to the west, the local archdukes wouldnt appreciate anyone approaching their territory.

You dont have the armies, Vihrogon, who had been remaining quiet all this time, suddenly said.

The comment created an immediate silence. When it came to warfare and military strategy, no one was more skilled. Hannah and March had plenty of experience, but compared to him, were mere children. Pan and Giaccia were far more ancient, but they were conquerors, not strategists.

Even if you avoid conflict, you dont have the numbers to level up. Youll have to move half of the population here and that wont get you much. Your best bet is to stop after you take over Wetie province.

Thatll give me a level at most, Dallion protested.

Whats the use of having territory if you dont have the resources to take advantage of it? Its a matter of logistics. You can do every element of what you said, but not all of them at once, and no one will let you take it slow and steady. If you want my advice, flush out the Order, get Wetie, and hold back until someone else makes a move.

I cant do that. Dallion was the one catching up. Remaining as he was would keep him at the back of the pack, and an easy target to be taken out. The whole plan revolved round making the archbishop weak to the point it became in everyones interest to take him out and broaden the field.

What if we take the skies? Diroh asked. There are still a lot of furies out there. If we get them on our side, we

It wont be enough, kiddo, the dryad interrupted with a smile reserved for bright children. Even if half switch sides, Dal will only be able to get part of the south. What he needs is a new army. He looked at Dallion. You know what you need to do, dont you?

Dallion remained silent for several seconds. He knew exactly what the other was saying, but he was hoping to keep that as a trump card later on.

Youre talking about the dryads, Euryala joined in. You want him to summon a dryad army.

There should be enough in that sword for a good start. Vihrogon glanced at the aura sword leaning against the far wall of the room. But to really make a difference, hell need more. Thats why he needs Wetie, isnt it, Dal?

You sly old fox, Dallion thought. You probably knew it the moment I unbanished you.

Seems like Ill take the twi-crown after all, Dallion said.

Chapter 929: The New Dryad Emperor

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

Reality changed, taking Dallion, Euryale, and Vihrogon into a stone temple. The place seemed deserted as ever, but there were two noticeable differences from Dallions last visit: although empty, it seemed rather well kept; and the smell of spring plants was felt in the air.

Dark had also insisted on coming, changing his appearance to that of a gecko on Eurlayes shoulder. For some reason, the dragon insisted that this was also his world, given that he had helped the pair gain control over it.

Its different, Euryale said.

Dallion concentrated, yet was unable to feel the extent of the realm. As a domain ruler, he was supposed to. Apparently, world item realms remained items. Back when his aura sword was known as the poison sword responsible for releasing the poison plague in the rest of the world, many powerful individuals fought for it. Archduke Lanitol had hired the Icepicker guild to find its location, while a rogue magepreviously of the Shimmering Orderhad succumbed to the Stars temptation and used it for his own devices.

A lot of things had changed since then. Dallion had become the owner of the weapon, transforming it into the aura sword he was currently using.

Time to see the world, Dallion whispered and made his way through the stone hall.

Stone murals depicting him and Euryale in heroic fashion covered the walls. As far as the inhabitants of the world were concerned, he was the deity that had saved them. That was technically truehe had destroyed the cracklings infesting the world as well as defeated the only surviving guardian of the item. Yet, he didnt regard himself as divine, not like the Moons were.

A vastness of green spread as far as the eye could see. Thanks to his current perception level, Dallion was able to see all the way up to the worlds sea. There was no telling how much time had

passed, but it had to be a lot since dozens of cities had emerged, many of them larger than Nerosal even. Created entirely of plants, they rose like multi-layered trees, covered in vines and bushes. Here and there, stone columns would be visible among the vegetation, more a fashion statement than anything else.

A world can see wonders when there are no cracks, Vihrogon noted. Hopefully, theyve not at war with one another.

Why would they be? Dark asked from Euryales shoulder.

Inner demons, the dryad replied. People fight because they cant get rid of their problems. Awakened fight because they cant agree on how best to solve them.

Just like in the real world,

Dallion thought.

The Architect had created a world in which everything was possible, yet it had taken the blink of an eye before the first Star to emerge and shatter the world into splinters. Since then, a cycle of chaos and repair had begun, culminating in a world conquest attempt.

Dallion cast a spell, rising into the air. Not to remain undone, Dark leaped off Euryales shoulder and transformed into his full dragon form. Despite growing considerably in size and level, there still was a rebellious stream left, urging him to compete. There was a time when Dallion would have agreed to it, though not now.

No need for that, Vihrogon said. Hell come to us.

Dallion looked down at him.

The world owners return after Moons know how long. You think the guardian will just sit by and ignore it? Hes known about us since the moment we entered. Now that hes estimated our strength, hell make an appearance. Isnt that right, Prolet? he asked casually.

Several steps away, a cluster of grass rose up, shifting into a sapling, then a full-fledged dryad. Everyone could see this wasnt the guardian, but an echo of his.

Not a good sign, Dallion thought. In the past, the guardian had been a lot more open.

Guardian? Euryale approached.

The dryad echo instinctively stepped back, wooden sickles appearing in both his hands. A few tense moments later, the sickles sunk half-way into the echos hands.

Youre back, it said with the hesitation of someone who barely remembered the encounter.

Dallion knew that wasnt the case. Guardians had much better memories than awakened. Most likely, it was the power level that had put Prolet on guard.

You dont seem glad to see us, Dallion floated back down. Any reason for that?

Youre different. The dryad stated flatly.

Weve grown. Dallion corrected.

Thats whats worrisome. To return after all this time, at the levels you are, you must want something. This story has been stolen from Royal Road. If you read it on Amazon, please report it

Various scenarios ran through Dallions mind. It wouldnt be beyond his capabilities to use his music skills to convince the guardian of anything he wanted. The nearly insurmountable opponent was less than half Dallions level, and not even fully able to take advantage of the realms powers. Hed easily get entangled in a web of music. Yet, anything gained through trickery had a far greater chance of getting unraveled, or at least Dallion tended to believe so.

We want to take the inhabitants back into the real world, he said directly. From what I see, theres a bit more than before.

The echo took a step back. For almost ten seconds he kept staring at Dallion, as if trying to determine if there was anything he could do about it. Fear mixed with hope fluctuated as they emanated from him. He couldnt deny that had been the initial goal of the world items upon their creation. Having it actually happen was a different matter.

I dont know everything thats going on out there, but Ive felt enough battles to know its not a safe place, Prolet responded. Most of my attention is focused on here, but I remain an item guardian. Ive felt the magic surge through the sword each time you fight.

Most times, Dallion corrected mentally.

You havent come here to let the dryads of this world free. Youve come because you need an army.

I wont deny that, Dallion retained his calm. Youre not the only world sword I have access to. Ill just tell you the stakes. Whoever wins the war in the real world gets to pass the sixth gate.

The revelation caused the echo to take another step back. Fear emanated from him as a fountain as he glanced at Vihrogon for confirmation.

Yep, Vihrogon nodded. Theres another war for the world, only this time there are four conquerors. Four? Prolets voice was faint.

Bottom line, whoever wins will pass the gate, and become a Moon to change the world as they see fit. Youve seen us change the world. Do you want to risk someone else doing it?

Who are the conquerors?

Theres me, the emperor of the Tamin Empire

Prolet seemed confused.

Human empire, Vihrogon clarified with a wave of his hand. Hes leading for the moment.

Tiallia the nymph empress, Dallion continued.

The nymphs were banished. The guardian interrupted.

They were, Vihrogon said again. Now theyre back.

And the archbishop of the Order of the Seven Moons.

The final name caused the Prolet to openly blink. Even for him, the Order had existed for as long as anyone remembered. They had never taken sides and always helped all that suffered at the hands of conflict. Having the archbishop try to take over the world sounded absurd to the point of heresy.

You're not lying, he noted.

No. Those are the four pretenders. As you've probably guessed, I'm the weakest, but if the nymphs follow me, that will change.

Follow you? A sad smile appeared on the dryads' face. So much time and were back where we started. The emperor created the sword marshals to serve as seeds in case we lost the war of conquest. Now, you're asking me to let everyone out so they could take part in another war.

I'm not asking anything. If I lose, I'll die, but it won't end there. Too many lines have been crossed for anyone to go back. A single victor will emerge, and they will change everything: oceans, continents, races, and everything within. In the case of this world, it's more likely that it will be destroyed before me. You said you knew how often I use the sword in battle. At my current awakening level, it'll be a lot easier for them to slowly chip away at my weapons and companions than kill me off directly.

Euryale glared at Dallion with several of her stakes. Although he wasn't using music, with such a threat, he might as well have been. Everything said was technically true, although generations might well pass between the current moment and the potential destruction of the world. On the other hand, should the dryads return to the real world, they'd survive the sword's demise provided that Dallion won.

If you pass the gate, Prolet began, How will you change the world?

I'll remove all battle scars and bring all seven races back to the world, Dallion replied without hesitation. Sincerity naturally filled his words. The same I did here.

There's only one race in this world.

I was still learning back then. A smile shined on Dallion's face. I'm not here to drag everyone out. Although even non-fighters will be of help, I'm only here to take those who are willing to follow.

Only those willing to follow? Prolet nodded. Then it'll be up for them to decide. Come to the temple city. I'll bring all the rulers there. It'll be your job to convince them.

Sure. And when I'm done with that, I'll convince all of their subjects as well.

Do that and you'll earn the two-crown. The echo sunk into the ground.

For the second time since the world's recreation, a general conclave was made to take place. As Vihrogon had suggested, while the world itself was very much alive and prospering, factions had formed among the population, bringing rise to several primary and secondary powers. Tensions had risen many times and the only reason for all-out wars to be avoided was the decisive actions of the guardian who had stepped in. The arrival of the world's creators quickly brought a different air to the gathering. Every ruler had gone to the temple city with serious doubts, only to have them subside upon setting eye on the levels of the visitors.

Men and women with millions of dryads under their command stared at Dallion and Euryale the same way he had stared at the first hunting party that had ventured into his village of Dherma all

that time ago. It was a deep held belief that only the greatest awakened could get beyond level twenty, with fifty being reserved for the all-powerful guardian of the world. Anything beyond that defied reality.

Dallion had been forced to use his music skills to calm them down and stop them gawking before he could get to the series matter. It was fair to say that he had some doubts regarding his success, but was optimistic he could get a quarter of the worlds population. Given how much they had grown, that would prove more than enough for him to establish a few cities in some of the uncontested regions of the world before snatching Wetie province and the other world items in the archdukes collection.

To his astonishment, all the rulers were overly eager to prove their strength to the worlds creators. If anything, arguments arose who should be the ones to enter the real world first. Judging by Prolets expression, similar outbursts were normal. And yet again, Dallion had to resort to music skills to bring the tensions down. Ultimately, it was decided that Vihrogonthe proclaimed envoy of the creators would lead the rules of all dryad nations simultaneously into the new world when the time came, where each of them would be given their own city.

The general population also felt blessed, grateful that they were the generation that would fulfill the age long prophecy of returning to the world beyond. And, while Dallion had promised that anyone who wished could return to the sword world in the future, should they choose, very few seemed remotely inclined to do so.

The days after Dallions return to the world item, it was unanimously decided that he be bestowed with the tri-crown, making him the new dryad emperor.

Chapter 930: Three Echoes

DRYAD RULER

(+2 Empathy)

You have fulfilled the promise made to the dryads generations ago. The question is, will you bring them to salvation or get them all killed?

The crown felt uncomfortable on Dallions head, though not nearly as uncomfortable as the realization that he had made the final step. The conquest was put in motion and now he couldnt turn back even if he wanted to.

A long time ago, he would have defined this whole thing as the final multiplayer battle, though that was back when he viewed things through the lens of video games. There was nothing fun about this. Any cheats and strategies were allowed and second place equaled death, or the last loser to die.

The dryad boost was going to increase his population, but in terms of warpower, there was a lot to be desired. Despite their native magic, less than ten percent were awakened. Even among them, the most skilled would need assistance passing the fourth awakening gate.

Because of that, the initial plan had to go through some changes. Too weak to settle the fallen south, or settle in the unoccupied barren lands of the west, the dryads would have to directly face the Orders war clerics in the eastern forests. From a purely strength perspective, the clerics had the upper hand, but hopefully the dryads numbers and environment were going to balance things out.

Worried? Euryale asked as she entered the dryads throne room. The sun gold armor had changed appearance, turning more regal than defensive.

A bit, he admitted.

I thought you'd spend some time watching the procession. It's not every day that you get an entire world to follow you.

Dallion couldn't even force a smile.

I can sense them just fine from here. The emotions were so intense that when combined with his magic vision, they allowed him to get a near-perfect image through the walls that surrounded him. I'll try to unbanish the dryad guardians back home.

The items he had gotten from Canopa, among a few other places, were a lot more experienced. Although minuscule when compared to the millions in this world alone, they'd act as commanders and crack troops. In that aspect, it was fortunate that they stuck together. Back when Dallion had attempted to acquire the mage enclave, he had plans to use them as his special forces, just as the archbishop was doing with the copyettes. Now, they'd be given far more significant roles, which required Moon vows.

Hey. The gorgon placed her hand on Dallion's shoulder. I'll be with you till the end. There's no need to worry.

Sadly, that brought as much concern as it did relief. Eury was someone who could handle herself well in battle. Even after Dallion's massive level increase, he'd be hard pressed to win against her without the use of magic and companions. Reading her emotions, he knew that she would die for him and if he messed things up, that was how things were going to end up.

I know. He stood up. No weakness. He told himself, using music skills to shred the threads of doubt within him. Time to see the archduke.

Concentrating, Dallion linked the world to his personal domain, then to a spot in the real world.

DUZHD VI has been added to your domain.

The CITY is Level 11

ROSSA has been added to your domain.

The CITY is Level 12

ZDRAVETS has been added to your domain.

The CITY is Level 10

LOZE has been added to your domain.

The CITY is Level 10

VECHER has been added to your domain.

The CITY is Level 11

VJATUR has been added to your domain.

The CITY is Level 10

Rectangles emerged as one after the other Dallion moved the major cities into the real world. The moment they did, they too started moving, depriving anyone of the opportunity to strike them with magic rockets.

Small towns and villages remained in the aura sword, in case anyone wished to return at a later time. Until then, the world guardian would remain the only entity there.

And now, time for the push. Dallion moved the new set to the very border with the Orders domain.

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

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

You are level 128.

Choose the trait you value the most.

A green rectangle emerged. Increasing his reaction to ninety-five, Dallion kept pushing the cities further into enemy territory.

Facing anyone else, the action wouldnt have achieved anything. However, the archbishops strength was also his weakness. Unlike everyone else, he didnt have real settlements, only a massive war force that he had placed within monasteries and citadels throughout the world. For infiltration and intimidation, that approach was unparalleled. When it came to domain control, though, such meager settlements were bound to lose when compared to vastly larger cities. Having millions of dryads emerge in a scarcely populated area had quickly shifted the balance of power, taking out chunks of Order territory and adding it to his own. From this point on, the only way for the Order to reclaim it was to go on the offensive and attack the cities, which would be considerably more difficult. And just to make sure, Dallion went on to gin things up by playing one more trump card.

Using the link, Dallion moved to his personal realm. Night had fallen, but the glow of the remaining dragon heart still added an orange hue to the blackness.

Nice play, Gen said.

All three of Dallions echoes were waiting, standing a few feet from where he had appeared. While all shared his face, time and personal preference had made them very different. As Jeremy had said, each echo came with its own personality, which inevitably led to changes.

Are you sure about this? Gen, the veteran, asked. He was the first echo that Dallion had created. Constantly there to provide advice, he had maintained the realm since the early days, restructuring and repairing everything from individual plants to mountains and islands. Im not sure youll be able to keep this place clean without me.

Always a smartass. Dallion shook his head. He knew that the echo could see exactly what he was thinking, and knew perfectly well that the step wasnt going to be easy. Yet, it was necessary and not only because of the promise or the current war. If Dallion needed to grow, he had to let part of his past go.

Reaching in the air, Dallion summoned the dragon heart. As the orange crystal appeared in his hand, the hue in the sky vanished. In its place, an endless number of green stars emerged, along with all seven Moons.

Combining attack and carving, Dallion slashed the Moonstone with his finger. A small fragment chipped off. No larger than an adults thumb, it contained the power to grant divinity for a matter of minutes; or in this case, something a lot greater.

Dallion caught the fragment midair, then went to Gen and pushed the fragment into the echos chest.

ECHO TRANSFORMATION

GEN has been granted the spark of life!

Link with DALLION SEENE severed.

GEN had grown into his own entity.

All current skills retained.

GEN is Level 14.

A green rectangle appeared, as the former echo was covered in orange light.

Thanks for everything you did, Dallion said. Ill try to keep this place livable.

Gen laughed, then disappeared in a cloud of fading particles.

DIVINE CREATION - GEN

(+1 Reaction)

You used a fragment of Dararrs Garnet to bring an echo to life. Gen has been transported to Sandstorm.

A stab of sadness swept through Dallion as the echo was moved out of his personal realm. It felt like a thorn in his heart, but not for a single moment did he allow it to take control.

Taking a step to the side, Dallion stood in front of July. This echo had kept the most boyish appearance of the group. He had been born the same day Gleam had become Dallions familiar and retained a good relation with all creatures and guardians within the realm ever since. Even now, both Gleam and Ruby rested on his left shoulder.

Youll need to give him some space, you two, Dallion said as he sliced off another shard of Moonstone.

Reluctantly, Gleam fluttered off, followed shortly after by Ruby.

Dont worry, youll still get a chance to see each other. Ill make sure of that. Dallion pressed the gem into the echos chest.

ECHO TRANSFORMATION

JULY has been granted the spark of life!

Link with DALLION SEENE severed.

JULY had grown into his own entity.

All current skills retained.

JULY is Level 21.

July looked down as the orange glow surrounded him, trying to hide his tears. He was by far the most emotional of the bunch.

Take care out there, Dallion said. In the very last moment, his former echo looked up, just before disappearing like the first.

DIVINE CREATION - JULY

(+1 Reaction)

You used a fragment of Dararrs Garnet to bring an echo to life. July has been transported to Sandstorm.

Two echoes were gone. Only one remained Ariel. He had been by far the most powerful echo in the realm, taking on the role of realm protector and overall loner. Unlike the rest, he had kept his hair white, in a sign of uniqueness, very much as his character suggested. During Dallions development, he was the one most pushing him forward, often arguing or talking back.

Nothing to say? Dallion asked, slicing off the final piece. Thats very unlike you.

Ive plenty to say. I just dont want to see you crying.

Touche. Dallion thought.

Didnt think youd actually do it, Ariel added, despite himself.

You never thought highly of me.

No. I always did, even when you didnt. He looked at the orange piece of crystal. I just never dreamed youd be given a chance to do this.

With a forced laugh, Dallion pushed the Moonstone fragment into the echos chest.

ECHO TRANSFORMATION

ARIEL has been granted the spark of life!

Link with DALLION SEENE severed.

ARIEL had grown into his own entity.

All current skills retained.

ARIEL is Level 42.

You better help the others level up, Dallion said as orange covered Ariel. Thats your problem now.

Seeing the way you did it, I doubt I can do worse, the other replied. And dont even think of cheaping out on gear! I know exactly what you can do.

The glowing light quickly dissolved into particles, leaving Dallion alone.

DIVINE CREATION - ARIEL

(+1 Reaction)

You used a fragment of Dararrs Garnet to bring an echo to life. Ariel has been transported to Sandstorm.

Well, thats that, Dallion said, although he knew that the echoes could no longer hear him. They were no longer part of his realm nor were they echoes. From this moment on, there would be no thought sharing, no reminding him what he was supposed to do, and no jokes on his behalf.

The pain in his heart had increased threefold. Dallion had yet to have children, let alone have them leave the nest but he imagined the feeling would be the same. The trio had literally been part of him, born in awakening trials, through internal revelations. From things that had kept him back, they had become part of his realm that propelled him forward and now they were their own entities out there in the real world.

A hundred and twenty-eight levels and you remain a softy, Gleam said, fluttering around Dallion. I guess thats what makes you you.

Look whos talking. Dallion kept the smile on his face. He could easily use his music skills to get rid of the pain, but this time, he chose not to. It was good to experience some pain from time to time. With what was coming, it was certain thered be a lot more of it.

One by one, the Moons in the sky faded away, leaving only the Orange Moon. The hint was not at all subtle, but still, it was a good one.

Alright, Dallion thought, summoning his carving tools. Theres no point in keeping it any longer.

A new gemstone was diligently given shape and added to his Moon emblem.

MOON EMBLEM

5/7 Complete

A yellow rectangle emerged. No sooner had it done so than Dallion returned to the dryad throne room within his aura sword.

Get Dark, he said to Eury, making his way to the nearest window. Were heading to Lanitol.