

## Leveling up 931

### Chapter 931: End of Lanitol

Emptiness resonated in the air, despite the giant crowds. Seen from the outside, Lanitol seemed better than ever. The city had seen a lot of calm as of late, despite the ongoing war. The surrounding fields and orchards produced food in great quantity and variety. There was plenty to go around and even use on luxuries such as exotic drinks and decorations. All that was fake.

Everyone with an awakened level of over eighty would feel that something was not right. Those above a hundred would even see everything that was wrong. Beneath the superficial glitter lay a core of nothing. Dallion couldnt see people interacting. From his perspective, he was surrounded by sleepwalkers whose actions were constantly directed through hundreds of invisible threads created by the domain itself. Even the awakened were letting themselves go with the flowprobably aware of the consequences if they didnt.

This place has changed, Euryale said.

There was a time when she had left Nerosaland Dallionto focus on her hunter training at Weties provincial capital. Now there was no hint of what had happened to the hunting den or its occupants. There was a time when Dallion believed them to have scattered to other countries and provinces, but the likelihood seemed low.

Cocoon of the chrysalis, Dallion said. At least one might hope.

A blond overseer emerged from the ground a few steps away. He was probably the only thing that remained elegant and calm just as Dallion remembered him.

Archduke, the overseer said with a low bow. The way he did it left it open to interpretation whether he was bowing to Dallion, Euryale, or both. A pleasure to have you visit again.

Normally, that would be a lie, but this time Dallion felt sincerity stream from within.

You seem a bit late, Dallion said. A bit longer and wed have reached the second platform.

We expected you would. The blond agreed. Since you didnt, I came to officially welcome you to the city.

This, in contrast, was a lie. Even at his current level, Dallion knew the importance of etiquette.

Archdukes, even weak ones, were petty and could start a losing battle just to prevent losing face. It would have been easy to land directly on the top city platform and proceed to the archdukes palace. However, the pair had chosen to enter the normal way by walking through the main gate. What was more, Dallion had even placed Dark within his personal realm to avoid displaying overt hostility. At the end of the day, he was aiming for a peaceful transfer of power. It would be bad if his first major battle was against a potential ally.

My mistake. Next time Ill inform you of my visit. Dallion paused a bit.

It would be most appreciated, but there really is no need. As second after the emperor, you have the right to drop by whenever you wish.

That was only a semi-lie. What the overseer meant to say was that Dallion had the strength to drop by. That much had been apparent even before Dallion and

Eury had set foot in the domain. For one thing, the magic barriers that had been so vital during the days of the poison plague were nowhere to be seen. The guards also were virtually non-existent, rushing to open the gates before Dallion could say a word. They were able to feel the power coming from Dallion and his wife all too well and had no intention of giving any pretext for discontent.

Any reason that the magic veil is gone? Dallion asked out of curiosity.

The archduke has had trouble finding a suitable mage, the overseer explained. Translated, that meant that Archduke Lanitol didn't trust any mages coming from the Academy or not. I've had to take on the role, which is only natural. I'm the city's overseer, after all.

We'll need an audience with the archduke, Euryale tactfully reminded.

But of course, my lady. It will be my pleasure to take you to his private chamber.

This was in stark contrast to all the previous visits. When March had led the two in pursuit of the plague sword, they were only allowed to talk to servants of the archduke's family. An audience was absolutely out of the question. Now, they were doing the broken ruler a favor by visiting him.

Creating a sphere of reality around them, the overseer slid through the city to the massive pillar holding the upper platforms. From there, they went straight up like a bubble in water all the way to the top structure and further into the archduke's palace. Rooms passed by one after the other. To Dallion's surprise, the throne room was also skipped, taking them to a relatively small chamber in which Archduke Lanitol was having dinner.

How the mighty have fallen, Adzorg couldn't help himself. Dallion had to agree.

The once mighty lion was now a shadow of his former self. His high body trait still maintained a strong facade, but neither it, nor the expensive clothes and rare heirlooms could fool anyone into thinking that things were the same as five years ago.

Sensing he was not alone, the provincial ruler paused briefly, then looked up.

Dallion and Euryale had been placed at the entrance of the room, a few steps away from the table where the archduke was eating. There were no guards or servants present, leaving Dallion to assume that the overseer had been taking on those roles as well.

Go ahead. The archduke gestured. Sit.

The snakes on Euryale's head gently moved about as she took the initiative and took her seat facing the man. Dallion paused for a few seconds before joining her. No sooner had they done so than two empty plates appeared in front of them.

They won't be staying for dinner, the archduke said.

The plates immediately disappeared.

I hear that you've taken the east. Archduke Lanitol said, slicing a thin sliver of meat from the plate in front of him. Even in its cooked state, Dallion could recognize it as wyvern. The meat of most such beasts was considered inedible, but with enough skill and preparation it became a rather unique

dish. Dallion himself had never tried it, but knew hunters who made a living selling off the meat to the imperial capital. And now youre taking the south.

For starters, Dallion said openly.

The time for pretenses had long passed. Besides, the old noble was in no position to do anything about it. He had already lost the province to Priscord. The only reason she hadnt taken advantage of it was because she had her sights set on something better.

Stolen content warning: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

So, you feel strong enough to take on the emperor? My grandfather thought the same. A single night was all it took to change his mind. No one talks about what happened, but he was never the same afterwards. The archduke took a bite of the wyvern meat, then left his fork on the plate. Some claim that it was a prison item placed by one of the imperial agents. Likely it was, but thats not what broke him. He looked Dallion in the eyes. It was the realization that he had reached his peak without having the strength to defeat the ruler. If he was strong, a prison item wouldnt have stopped him. Are you strong enough, boy?

Not yet, Dallion replied without blinking. But I will be. I want your world item collection.

Youve come to see me just for that? The archdukes face twisted in anger. Spikes emerged from the floor, extending directly towards Dallions neck.

You already know the rest. Dallion remained perfectly calm. Even if the archduke seriously wanted to harm him, the method wouldnt have worked. With his speed, hed be able to move away before they broke his skin. And since youre eating alone, I doubt you particularly care.

If any of the vultures in my family were half worth a damn, Id have given them the throne and the title. The spikes remained as they were. None of them made a move, waiting for me to die before they start squabbling for whats left.

Why are you so sure that they didnt? Dallion leaned forward.

There was an intense moment of mutual staring, after which Archduke Lanitols frown deepened.

Falkner, he said. You made a deal with Falkner.

Is there anyone more suitable?

For you, no. For me there was a long pause. Maybe not. My children are idiots. At least that crazy mage had the guts to go for the throne, even if he was using Azures to do it. This lot, they have neither the strength, nor the guts.

Nor the brains, Dallion thought. Maybe his time in the imperial capital had made him more cynical, but he would have expected them to have started testing the political waters years ago. No wonder that Priscord had seen this opportunity. As the saying went, passiveness was an early sign of weakness.

How long do I have? The archduke grasped the situation.

Ill leave that to you, provided you give me your territory.

Theres a fine line between strength and overconfidence.

True, but thats something for me to worry about. I already own half the province. No matter what Ill do, imperial troops will pour into here. This way, the entire province might be seen as not worth saving.

Youre hurting his pride, Adzorg warned.

Beggars are not choosers, Dallion replied. Lanitol isnt an idiot. My guess is that hes been waiting for this to happen ever since the failed coup against him.

*That doesnt mean you should rub it in.*

It doesnt have to be public, Dallion added.

Thats your concession?

Yes. Euryale joined in the conversation. Dals an empath, so Ill spell out your choices. Either you get on with this, or Ill take the city by force and trust me, I can get the top two platforms before anyone figures out whats going on.

**LANITOL has been added to your domain.**

**The CITY is Level 14**

**ARLERA has been added to your domain.**

**The CITY is Level 10**

**GORBOM has been added to your domain.**

**The CITY is Level 10**

Three rectangles flashed in front of Dallion. They were followed by a series of others of lesser settlements: towns, villages, and even a few outposts. With this action, the province was effectively part of his domain. Yet, despite the territorial gains, Dallions awakened level didnt increase. As he suspected, it was going to take a bit more to achieve that goal.

Leaving Euryale to keep Lanitol company, Dallion used his domain ruler ability to go directly to the old nobles treasury. The place was massive, built beneath the palace. There were enough guards and artifacts to give anyone a hard time getting through. None of those had an effect on the owner, however.

Choosing to save time, Dallion made sure there were no guards within the vault structure itself, then ripped it out of the real world, placing it into the training stiletto his old Icepicker instructor had given him.

**TREASURE VAULT has been removed from your domain.**

**TREASURE VAULT has been added to TRAINING STILETTO**

Once that was done, there was time to go through the whole trove of treasures without wasting a moment.

The space was filled with thousands of valuable artifacts excavated from the Nerosal ruins. A great majority weren't even leveled up. In better times, awakened guilds would have a field day exploring and leveling up every single one of them. Right now, though, Dallion was only there for the aura swords and, surely enough, he soon found them.

The old man had understated the size of his collection. Based on the way he behaved, one could be led to believe that he had half a dozen at most. In truth, there were dozens. Most were covered in black rust and mold, with some being in such a bad condition that they were only held together by the stand they were placed on.

Regardless of condition, Dallion went through every last one, purging all cracklings and rustlings within. With his current powers, such a feat was no more difficult than stretching. Sadly, the gains were a lot less plentiful than he had hoped. Of the fifty-seven aura swords, forty-nine were completely deprived of life. In five more, the dryads had gone entirely feral to the point that even the guardians weren't able to do anything about it. Just in the remaining three, the populations were comparable to the dryads he had already freed, although their awakened levels were considerably less.

Even when Dallion brought them into the real world along with the minotaurs that also were an almost permanent presence in many of the aura swords he had only managed to double his existing forces, increasing his awakening level to a hundred and twenty-nine.

These had gained him the western forests and the southern part of the Tamin empire, but the real fallen south, not to mention the forbidden north, remained out of reach.

A few hours later, the capital of Jio Province was turned to glass by fire from the sky. The end-game battle had begun.

## Chapter 932: The Ever-shrinking Prize

Whole regions of the world were turned to glass or slapped by devastating waves. All three pretenders immediately responded to Dallion's territorial push. The suspicions of his war council had proven absolutely correct. Once the war started, it was exceedingly difficult to keep on growing. The territory Dallion had obtained had been substantial, yet he had lost almost as much in the following actions. While he had retained all of his settlements, glass craters had emerged in several areas, mostly points that bordered the Tamin empire.

Massive areas of coastline were also devastated by waves as the ocean pushed to expand. Although he didn't see the full picture, Dallion was left with the impression that, other than him, Tiallia had gained the most. The Order had quickly retreated, severing the links between its domains. That was the problem of a vast observation network: they were capable of dealing with any single threat, but not all threats at once.

In response, the archbishop wasted no time targeting a large number of easy targets. Dallion's capital had also suffered a near miss. It was only thanks to his rocket crossbows that he had managed to evade a repetition of Jio Province.

## DOMAIN INVASION

A red rectangle flashed in front of him.

The emperor's pushing east, he said in his war room.

How? Hannah asked. There were a dozen patrols in that area.

No idea. I didnt sense a thing. It might have been from the air.

Ill check it out, Diroh suggested eagerly.

No sooner had she done so than Adzorg floated to the fury and placed both of his hands on her shoulders.

Lets not get carried away. For all we know, the emperor might be leading the charge.

The explanation was plausible enough to have the fury reluctantly reconsider. Dallion felt the disappointment and determination stream from her. She had improved a lot since Dallion had brought her from Halburn, making the jump from non-awakened to a level sixty far faster than him. Sadly, that was where her limit had kicked in. Even with Skyes help and all the artifacts in Dallions possession, shed be unable to become a domain ruler.

I dont think its the emperor, Dallion said. It might be his dragon.

The Great Dragon Aurun, Hannah said in reverence.

Looks like Im not the only one with a dragon, Euryale said, more in reaction to the former innkeeper.

It'll be a Moonless day when you can compare yourself to the emperor and his legendary dragon, girl, Hannah snapped. The historical records said that he achieved victories in half the continent. If hes gone back to that, not sure even you can step up to him. She glanced at Dallion. Youll have to start a game of cat and mouse. Since you cant win against his dragon, you have to capture everywhere he isnt.

Theorys always good, Pan intervened. But I doubt he remained on the throne for so long by leaving things to chance. Despite the losses on the ground, Tamin still controls the skies. Not to mention that he still has a few capable archdukes. Youll have to deal with them before making any gains. And remember, you also can only be at a single place at once.

What if his echoes level up? Diroh asked, full of eagerness once more.

They arent my echoes anymore.

The tone was soft but clearly conveyed Dallions disapproval of using the term. Gen, July, and Ariel were their own entities now and while they gladly agreed to help out however they could, they werent to be used as Dallions stand-ins.

Theyre human now, Adzorg explained to his fury pupil. And, like you, not otherworlders. Although easier, leveling up still comes with its challenges. Theres a reason that we must only level up once per day.

The fury said nothing.

The phase of mass destruction continued for days. Other than the devastating waves and rockets, little else took place. Even reconnaissance was limited to specific key spots throughout the continent. By this time, everyone had picked up the habit of keeping their settlements in constant motion. People were indeed the key resource in a painfully pragmatic way. And while Dallion was

pleased a lot of them were kept safe, the mere thought that they were viewed as numbers in an experience bar gnawed at him more and more, appearing in his nightmares.

Often, he would catch himself hoping that the Moons would step in and stop all this, but they never did, remaining in the sky day and night, watching the destruction beneath. Deep inside, he knew that it was a barrier he had to push through, but with each day his heart tightened more and more.

Only Euryale knew his burden, and just like him, she couldn't share it with anyone else. Even the appearance of uncertainty in either of the ruling pair would only bring more harm. As a means of countering it, they would spend a moment every day within a realm, away from the chaos that surrounded them.

This tale has been unlawfully lifted from Royal Road. If you spot it on Amazon, please report it.

You can't stop thinking about it, can you? Pan managed to catch one of the few instances in which Dallion was alone. You know it's better than any alternative, and still part of you isn't certain it was all worth it.

I get the feeling you've been through this before.

Oh, yes. The copyette made its way next to Dallion.

The bubble surrounding the city was crisscrossing his wider domain faster than a flying arrow, and yet no matter how far one looked, all they could see was a perfectly static background which had always been there. Even that was an illusion.

Chainlings have been flowing into the wilderness again, Pan continued. Only in the destruction zones for now, but they'll start spreading.

That will make claiming land more difficult, Dallion said as an afterthought.

Not for the moment. Even voidlings fear power. Eventually, there will be enough of them to merge together and go on a rampage. Then someone will have to step in.

Usually, it was the Order of the Seven Moons that would do so. Unfortunately, the Order had suffered the greatest number of losses. Jeremy, Dallion, and Tiallia knew enough about the archbishop to be afraid, so they took every chance they had to diminish his power as much as possible. Dallion had taken the east forest, the emperor had razed any shrine and monastery that remained within his territory, as for the nymph empress she was continuously transforming the west coast of the continent into an archipelago, systematically destroying every army of war priests she came upon. Whatever alliance had been between her and the Order was long forgotten.

The south and the north remain unoccupied, Pan said. No one sees them as viable. That only leaves the ocean.

I can't fight her on her territory. You saw what happened last time I tried.

Your level was a lot lower then. Besides, you're still the underdog. The Order was the main threat, so all of you combined your efforts to cripple it. Now that it's done, the empire and the nymphs are the front runners. You don't need to defeat the empress, just engage enough of her forces. The emperor would do the rest.

What makes you think he won't go after me?

If he thought you were a greater danger, he would have done so. All attacks so far have had a double function. The Orders rockets strike areas between you and the empire, the emperor targets coastal areas, and the nymphs for the most part are focused on areas that are contested between you and the Order.

Dallion let out a deep sigh. It was a strange blessing being the weakest.

The ever-shrinking prize, Pan said all of a sudden.

What? Dallion turned towards the copyette.

Thats what I used to call it. The more you fight for the world, the less of it is there. The only thing that keeps you going is the hope that once youve won, youll get to become a Moon and fix it all.

That was very much what Dallion was hoping. If he turned out to be wrong, even the winner wouldnt amount to much.

Youve seen a lot more than youre sharing, havent you? Dallion asked.

Yes, but I cant tell you any of it. Not yet.

I can only learn what I already know. I never liked that rule.

It has its downsides, but in the long run its a good rule. If Id really known what it was to be a domain ruler when I awakened, Id have created a lot more chaos on my way to the top. As would anyone else.

Yeah. Probably Dallion looked at the horizon. A chain of mountains was visible in the distance the same that had been there for thousands of years. In a blink of the eye they were gone, replaced by a view of the ocean. Youre wrong about one thing, he added.

What exactly? Pan laughed.

Attacking the ocean isnt my best bet. I can still claim the south. Maybe even the north.

How? That wont bring you more people. And even if you claim a bit more territory, youll need to take the forces from somewhere, which will invite everyone to fill the void.

Why are you convinced I cant find more inhabitants?

Please tell me youre not thinking of speed breeding.

Huh? Dallion trembled. There was something in that combination of words that made the phrase repulsive.

Move people back into the swords, leave them for a day to breed, then return a few new generations into the real world. For one thing, it wont work, for another, that would definitely be breaking a Moon law.

Thats not what I had in mind.

What then?

Shardflies, Dallion whispered. Im following the path of empathy. Whos to say that only people can be my subjects?



For the first time in a very long while, Pan was at a loss for words. Technically, there was no rule against it, but it still felt unrealistic.

If it were possible, the dryads would have done it.

Dryads didnt have to resort to that. Besides, Im not talking about using them as weapons, but having them join me.

Youve done some crazy things, but this shardflies?

They are destructive. Besides, they were brought into this world, same as us. And Dallion opened the palm of his hand. Gleam and Ruby emerged. Both were in largely diminished sizes, remaining there like delicate butterflies. I have the perfect means to convince them.

It took less than a moment for Dallion to emerge in the southmost part of his domain. After the fight for the Learning Hall, this was where he had agreed to send the creatures. It remained uncertain how willing they would be to have anything to do with humans, but as things stood, they were Dallions best bet.

The standard pair of shardflies were capable of laying close to a thousand eggs once per year. In normal circumstances, about a tenth of those would survive to adulthood, after which theyd fly out on their own, becoming the territorial monsters they were later known to be. Yet, the colony Dallion had sent here was anything but standard. Brought to this world by magic, they had become used to sticking together andwhen neededfighting together. There was a good chance they had increased their original number tenfold, provided the other monsters of the fallen south hadnt done anything about it.

Please tell me youre not thinking of making me royalty. Gleam fluttered in front of Dallions face.

I thought you enjoyed having power.

I enjoy having power and freedom.

Fluttering beside her, Ruby didnt say a thing.

*Ill help you find them and help convince them to listen to you. What you do after that is none of my business.*

Still itching to fight a dragon?

*Wouldnt anyone? Youre not the only one whos grown. Its time I showed the world what Im capable of.*

Ruby extended his wings, giving them a razor-sharp edge.

Yes, you too, Ruby, Gleam said. While undistinguishable to most, the ruby shardfly had managed to mellow her out a bit. It helped considerably that he himself had gotten stronger.

Taking a step forward, Dallion cast a spell that lifted him into the air. The rest of the search hed have to do flying and hope that no one decided to send a rocket his way.

Chapter 933: Soft Cap Achievement

As Dallion flew into the crater that composed the fallen south, he could feel the eerie calm that wrapped the world. There hadn't been a rocket or tidal wave for over six hours, as far as he could tell. It was easy to think that the sides had grown tired of mass attacks, but the truth was that such forms of action were simply no longer efficient. Every settlement was in constant motion; the world itself had entered a phase never seen since the start of time. Travelling was all but impossible from this point on, people had to rely on their domain rulers and overseers to transport people and goods where they needed to be.

Dallion suspected that in a day or two the next phase would start: a new form of strategic combat in which settlements were the pieces moved on the board. As long as one managed to surround an enemy settlement with an overwhelming force, they could tear it off from an enemy's domain and add it to theirs. Before that, Dallion had to win his new army and, hopefully, increase his awakening level by one or two.

Beasts once considered lethal scattered at the sight of Dallion. Even the stupid ones were aware they didn't have the strength to face a being of such power. Yet, there still was no trace of any shardfly colonies.

Maybe they really died out, Adzorg suggested. The times aren't perilous just for people.

Dallion didn't reply. There always was a possibility of it happening, even if the odds were low. At the same time, searching for a bit longer would cost him very little, while the potential of reward was huge.

Stopping in the air, Dallion summoned his vortex finder. There were several small dots indicating small vortexes, but nothing that could be considered a shardfly colony.

Any thoughts, Gleam, Ruby? he asked, putting the magical device away.

Nothing, the spectral shardfly admitted. I'd have sliced through half the area as a reminder of what would happen if anything enters my territory.

You're too wild for your own good.

*Most creatures in the wilderness are.*

If the incident at the Academy was an indication, the colony might well have burrowed itself deep beneath the ground. Dallion might as well have flown over billions of the insects and never known. They didn't like intrusion and if they had picked up on magic, could well create a complex illusion that would fool his device or even Gleam.

I might as well Dallion didn't finish.

Thanks to his high perception, he noticed a dot of fire flying right at him. Summoning his harpysword, Dallion directed a point attack in the dot's direction, while simultaneously casting two aether sphere spells around his companions. Gleam protested, naturally, slicing the confinements with her wings.

Get Ruby out of here! Dallion ordered as he darted towards the source of the distant attack. Don't get involved! You're not an item guardian anymore!

As he suspected, a new torrent of flame emerged from the distancedragon fire. This time, it surrounded a core of lightning.

Im not here to play! Dallion infused his sword with spark, then thrust it forward. A growing spiral filled the air.

Both attacks clashed, but Dallions was clearly the strongest, dispersing the energy of flame and lightning, as if they were dandelion seeds.

Im not here for you, Derrion! Dallion shouted, maintaining six instances in close proximity. And even if I were, youre no longer able to take me on. Music strands went in all directions, instilling fear and doubt into anything they touched.

In response, another stream of fire shot at him, this one coming from a totally different direction. A lot less powerful, it shot up from the ground, missing by several feet. Dallion knew well in advance that it wasnt going to hit him, spending the time to locate the source. And, this time, he managed to do so.

His opponent was a dragon, though not large enough to be called an adult. To his relief, it wasnt the emperors great dragonAuruns magic attacks were different, more hostile. The fire of this creature seemed to have determination and a touch of fear within it.

Summoning his aura sword, Dallion sliced the space around him, performing a full three-sixty slash attack. He could see clusters of magic concentration in the area shift. His invisible opponents were moving away, expecting a line attack. Instead, a series of magic circles emerged, releasing purple lightning all around.

Not to comment on your battle, dear boy, but usually one doesnt cast an anti-magic spell in the area one is, Adzorg said.

Its fine, Dallion ignored the spell and the comment. The layer of magic threads he had covered his skin with were more than adequate to counteract such a feeble spell. The illusions of his opponents, on the other hand, werent.

Air shattered in several spots, causing several green dragons to emerge. Four of them flew off with a snarl, quickly casting new sets of illusions to conceal themselves. The remaining two didnt. Maintaining an aggressive stance, they kept on flapping their wings, staring straight at Dallion.

Youre a lot stronger now, a female dragon said. Not fair!

Snarky? Dallion asked.

The following snark indicated that he was correct, just as the dragon didnt appreciate the name he had given it back during dragon training.

Emerald? An instance of Dallion addressed the other dragon. Wheres

The cone of a hurricane formed beneath him, thrusting Dallion up into the sky. There was a time when such an attack would have been fatal. Now it was slow, weak, and far too visible.

Choosing the path of least resistance, Dallion let the wild force carry him, yet before any of the air cluster currents could harm him in any way, he sliced them one from the other and gently pushed them away, creating a zone of calm around him.

A second cone of air blasted from below, in an attempt to increase the intensity of the air currents.

The effort was in vain. At a moment's notice, Dallion slashed through the cone again, letting off hundreds of line attacks. He could feel a slight pull as someone attempted to force a different instance of reality. Too weak to cause any changes, it persisted for a while longer, before abruptly ending.

I told you, I haven't come to fight, Dallion said, as the cone of air around him weakened. Already it had lost two-thirds of its strength and kept on decreasing until only a gentle breeze remained. I can oblige you if you want, but it wouldn't last long.

The air above the ground rippled. Several layers of illusion cracked one after the other, revealing the massive form of a green dragon remaining in the air, right above the thick jungle. Not intimidated in the least, Dallion floated down, stopping right in front of the monster's face.

Quite the welcome you put out, he said.

The dragon snorted, releasing vast amounts of air through his nostrils.

You never did that during my previous visits here, Dallion added.

You've changed, the dragon's voice boomed. The world has changed as well.

So, you felt it.

Any domain ruler would feel the change. The wilderness has been growing, yet all the power keeps concentrating in smaller and smaller areas. Green sparks flickered all over the dragon's scales. I've been alive for a very long time. I remember the time before the fall of the city and the split of races, but this... This is something I have never seen before.

Acceptance emanated through the dragon's shell.

Have you come to claim the fallen south? it asked.

Yes, Dallion admitted. Do you want it? I can give it to you.

If you do, you'll only make me your puppet. The dragon snapped its jaws in anger. There can only be one master of a realm, and I don't have the strength to challenge you.

One by one, the smaller dragons flocked to the scene. Dallion could feel the fear emanating from them, but also determination. They knew perfectly well that they had no chance against him, but even so were willing to give their lives to help their father.

They've grown quite a bit, Dallion smiled. Dark has as well.

Relief and pride emanated from the ancient dragon, even if on the outside he didn't react in the least.

I'm searching for shardfly colonies, Dallion changed the topic. They weren't up north, so I thought they might have settled down here.

If you encounter this story on Amazon, note that it's taken without permission from the author. Report it.

Will you make them the same offer you made to me?

You said you werent interested. Yes, I plan on giving them the south to rule on my behalf.

So, theyll become another army, giving you a few levels in the process. A guttural growl came from the dragon. The way of the domain ruler.

Its better than the alternative. Trust me. As you said, the world is a lot different now.

The young dragons moved closer to their father.

Are there any safe places left? Derrion flapped his massive wings once, rising a few dozen feet higher.

Dallion shook his head.

I see

You can go into an item realm. It wont be safer, but at least youll live under the illusion it is. Until it no longer matters, he added mentally. Ill try to protect you as much as I can.

You?

The dragon laughed internally. Dallion could hear the emotion so loud that the dragon might as well have done so.

The first time you came here, you only survived thanks to luck and my mercy, the dragon continued. Now, you say that you have to protect me. I dont think so. Derrion turned around, looking at the six dragons that he gently tucked beneath his wing. The shardflies are here, he said after a while, refocusing his attention onto Dallion. Look for them beneath the towers. Youll find one of their nests beneath the building on which I had mine. From there, you should be able to find the rest on you own.

That made sense. The shardflies had come into existence in the basement of a mage and were accustomed to think of it as their home.

Thanks. Dallion reached out towards the dragon, but the creature pulled back. Are you sure you dont want to stay here? There are no guarantees, but Ill do what I can to help.

I walked away from one master because I wanted to have freedom of mind. What was the point if now I went back to another? The dragon spread its wings. Its scales flickered, forming symbols between them. Good luck, otherworlder. I hope you make it till the end.

Green and purple magic threads shot out, surrounding the creature like a cocoon. For several seconds, they grew brighter and brighter, until they suddenly imploded on themselves, leaving nothing behind.

Goodbye, Dallion said mentally.

The spell had been too foreign for him to discern its purpose, but he could hope that it was a teleportation spell.

Hell be fine, Adzorg said from within Dallions realm. Dragons havent survived so long by accident.

Yeah. Dallion rose further up into the air.

What was Dark going to say about this? Maybe it was better if Dallion didnt share the encounter. That was something hed have to discuss with Euryale once he came back. For the moment, he had to focus on what hed come here for.

It took him a few minutes to find Gleam and Ruby. The pair had kept away from the fight, as he had instructed, but in exchange demanded to know all the gory details of the fight. Upon learning that there werent any Gleam flicked her wings in disappointment, but dropped the topic. It was no secret that she wished she could take on a dragon, especially after failing to do anything substantial during the northern dragon hunt.

Reaching the building ruins the green dragon had spoken of took less than an hour. On the way, Dallion went through dozens of conversations in his mind, anticipating any demand or doubt the creatures would have. The moment they got a glimpse of Gleams true form, the negotiations were already won. Despite coming from another world, the creatures remained true to their nature they were drawn to the strong specimens of their species, viewing them as the greatest asset to protect and lead the colony. Thus, the decision was left to her.

Quite ironic that I get to claim this place, Gleam said, amused. Its the place from where I got sent to the banished realms.

Think of it as interest for what you did that, then. Dallion looked around. Even now, thousands of shadflies were off to inform the other colonies of the changes. I take it you dont want to stay here.

*Not a chance. Your fights will be a lot more ferocious from here on. Im not missing that.*

Alright, lets get on with this.

**You have created the Land of SOUTHERN FALLS Level 1.**

**You have full control of the Land of SOUTHERN FALLS.**

**A quartz spider has been made the lands guardian.**

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

For a moment, Dallion wondered whether the area guardian would end up being a shardfly as well, but it turned out to be a quartz spider. That was irrelevant, of course. Dallion immediately linked the new domain to his whip blade, which was also Gleams personal domain.

**SOUTHERN FALLS linked to GLEAM**

Now it was time to see whether Dallions theory about the shardflies was true.

Venturing into the realm, he immediately had Nox challenge the guardian, then proceeded to destroy him, improving the settlement each time. When the area reached level five, Dallion paused for a few moments. This was the moment of truth. If he succeeded in improving it further, all this would have been worth it.

**SOUTHERN FALLS Level increased**

**The VILLAGE has now been improved to a Level 5 TOWN**

Yes! Dallion kept on going.

Soon, the town became a city and kept on growing. At fifteen, the city became his domains capital, which was rather awkward, come to think of it. Normally, this was the point at which one would stop, though not Dallion. When the domain reached level eighteen, three rectangles emerged.

**SOUTHERN FALLS Level increased**

**The CAPITAL CITY has now been improved to a Level 18 WORLD CAPITAL**

**WORLD CAPITAL**

**(+2 Mind)**

**Every bright hopeful goes through this step. The question is, what will you do now that you have it?**

**You have broken through your one hundred and thirtieth barrier.**

**You are level 130.**

**Choose the trait you value the most.**

And there it was the level that Dallion had strived for. Most likely, it was going to be the last level he'd earn before the end of the conflict, but it made him feel a lot better. Given that his reaction was at ninety-nine, he chose to finally add the final point to make it a round hundred.

No sooner had he done so, when a new rectangle popped up.

**HUNDREDS SOFT CAP**

**All your traits and skills are now a hundred or more. Its quite a feat for which you'll earn something special.**

A hundred? Dallion wondered. So many things had been happening lately that he hadn't even stopped to think about it. Indeed, everything was three digits, indicating a vast sense of improvement since he'd started. On the negative side, he was still thirty levels short of the awakening gate. Sadly, there was no way he could make up the difference through achievements.

Without warning, an orange cloud poofed into existence before him. Once the cloud faded away, Dallion saw nothing less than a dragonlet of the same color curled up on the ground.

**FAMILIAR COMPANION GREAT DRAGONLET AQUILEQUIA**

**You have gained a Level 1 companion!**

**While still young, the dragonlet has the power and potential of a great dragon. Loyal and eager to grow, the dragonlet has been created by the Orange Moons magic and has the potential to move faster than any creature as well as offer some of its magic when needed.**

**Being a great dragonlet, it can additionally see magic threads and move in and out of realms of its own accord. The size and abilities of the familiar depend on its level.**

It had been a while since Dallion had received a familiar. Ever since receiving Gleam, he had been convinced that only a Moon would let a new creature join him, and now a Moon had. Not only that, but they had granted him the most special creature one could hope for.

Aquilequia? Dallion asked.

The dragon opened a lazy eye, then stood up, stretching its wings, tail, and neck. The resemblance was unmistakable, although she was a lot smaller now, and without all the hatred emanating from her.

Hello, she said in an almost childlike voice. Are we in the real world?

Yes. Dallion reached out and petted the creature on the top of the head. Yes, were in the real world.

Chapter 934: The Domain War

## **DOMAIN INVASION**

Its starting, Veil said. Someone didnt like you reaching the big one-thirty.

Dallion couldnt agree more. Mere hours had passed since he had taken control of the fallen south. It was natural to expect some sort of reaction. Instead of sending a few missiles to glass the crater, however, Jeremy had resorted to a territorial attack. Over a dozen mid-sized settlements had pushed into Dallions territory, aiming for conflict. At present, a quarter of Wetie province had been taken and an even larger chunk of Dallions western domain.

Get everyone to the war room, Dallion said as he focused on the exact territories being lost.

Diroh had sent fury scouts to all the border regions. The fact that none of them had sounded an alarm suggested that there had been no cloud fort movements on the empires side. Most likely they were kept in reserve should Tiallia attack with her water islands.

Vihrogon emerged in the large room a step away from his designated seat. Hannah followed.

Unfortunately, we wont be able to join you in person, dear boy, Adzorg said from within Dallions personal realm. Cloud forts have been sighted in the north, requiring our full attention.

If theres any danger, get Di out of there, Dallion ordered without hesitation.

*You know she wont like that.*

*Thats why Im telling you. The Circle might be there and shes not ready to face them.*

Euryale and Ariel were the last to arrive. Pan focused on his old role of checking for copyette infiltrates. He had already expressed a desire not to be involved in the combat decisions unless there was a very specific need for him. Having already gone through this during the days of his own world conquest attempt, he preferred not to be reminded of his failure. Besides, this was an entirely new type of war he knew nothing of.

The empire is giving a push, Dallion shared the situation. For now, theyre pushing both east and south.

Hes copying your method, Vihrogon said with a slight laugh. Its the same way you pushed out the Order.



Yes, Dallion thought. The emperor seemed to be copying a lot. Everyone was. As the saying back on Earth went: In order to become number one, do everything it takes. In order to remain number one, copy number two.

Despite all the problems it faced, the Tamin Empire was undoubtedly the strongest power there was. With the Orders influence waning, neither Dallion nor the nymphs were anywhere close. By pushing Dallion out of his domain, Jeremy aimed at gaining undisputed control of the entire continent, and possibly a few more levels . Afterwards, he could focus his whole attention on Tiallia.

It was outright scary how effective the man was at copying others. If everything that was said was true, half a century ago he was the archbishops subordinate and only one of hundredspossibly thousandsotherworlders. He had then copied the Order of the Seven Moons to make a similar organization of his own. He had made use of the skills and abilities of the people who were part of it before killing them off. Even the rockets were knowledge that was taken from the archbishop. Now, he had done the same with Dallions idea.

## **DOMAIN INVASION**

**The TOWN of ISAL is no longer part of your domain.**

Hes deployed troops, Dallion said, bringing silence to the room. Ive lost a Wetie Province settlement.

The silence lasted several seconds longer.

The empires done this before. Hannah was the one who broke it. The legions would occupy settlements while fighting chainlings and other wilderness monsters. It happened a few times during my time.

Its not just imperials. Dallion clenched his fists. Priscord.

Of the people alive, there werent many that could cause such a reaction. The former countess was among the select few. She had treated Dallion as a pawn pretty much since his arrival in Nerosal, using him to exacerbate the friction between her and Archduke Lanitol and come out on top. Twice she had tried to have Dallion killed and use his death to her political advantage.

Im moving the children to Dherma, Gloria said through Dallions larger domain. Since the absorption of Wetie province, she had become one of his five overseers.

Send them here, Veil suggested. Itll be safer.

Just because there are more people doesnt make it safe, Gloria snapped at her brother. All the capitals are dangerous, and if I know Priscord, shes the type of woman to hold grudges for centuries and take great pleasure in extinguishing them.

That much was true. It was very much like her to try to take vengeance on the province she viewed as being rightfully hers. Maybe that was the deal the emperor or his aether echo had offered: take

Dallion out of the game and claim everything he had for her own. That would make her second within the empire and probably the person with the most lands.

Do it. Dallion gave his permission. All other overseers, join her.

Isn't that a bit rash? The Lanitol overseer asked. I understand Gloria, but to have all of us flee?

Unauthorized content usage: if you discover this narrative on Amazon, report the violation.

*None of you can stand up to her. And trust me, she'll join the fight soon enough. Nothing beats the satisfaction of personally dealing with someone who slighted you.*

While not all the overseers agreed, they saw the logic in Dallion's words. Left with little choice, they left the cities they were overseeing to gather in Dallion's home town.

Emotions of deep gratitude emanated from Gloria. She didn't voice it, yet was fully aware that Dallion could sense it. Although they had drifted apart, there remained a few strong bonds between them. In many ways, he viewed her as an extension of his family. There was no way he'd put her children at risk. If he had a say, he didn't want to put any children of his inhabitants at risk. Awakened and armies were one thing; they had made the decision on some level to put their life on the line. As long as he followed the path of the empath, Dallion's goal was to protect those who didn't.

I'll be going to face her myself, he said out loud.

No, Hannah said in a firm tone. Too risky. It's no coincidence that the emperor let her lead the attack. He's hoping to draw you out.

Best not to disappoint him, then.

Are you sure? Euryale asked.

Dallion nodded.

What's your plan?

They attacked where it was expected, so I'll do the opposite.

Alright. Then I'll do the same. The gorgon's snakes twirled. If they're expecting to face you in Wetie, I'll oblige. I also have a few scores to settle.

Dallion thought about arguing, but changed his mind before any words came out. Eury could be twice as determined as him. Plus, he didn't have to worry about her handling herself in battle. She was better at analyzing threats and knew when to retreat and when to push on. Besides, Dark was going to be with her.

Pick some troops. When you're ready, I'll send you to Lanitol.

I can do that, Veil said. You focus on your stuff.

You don't have the reach. Dallion gave the overseer a stern look.

I don't need it. All I have to do is move Alliance there, the blond smirked.

Dont mess it up.

Look whos talking. Ill do my part. Dont end up getting killed. If something happens to you, all the settlements become static.

Not the greatest prep talk, but Veil never was good when it came to oratory skills. He wasnt wrong, though. It was Dallions powers that overseers and local area guardians were taking advantage of when moving the settlements. If Dallion were to die, there was a good chance that his domain died with him. Euryale would certainly try to hold things together. There was even a good chance that she might save a lot of people. Sadly, the thing about vacuum was that it was filled equally fast from all sides. Each next successor would only manage to claim part of what was lost.

Ill hold down the east forest, Vihrogon said. In case the order has any ideas. I doubt that the nymphs will take any action.

What if you come across Aurun? Hannah asked.

Me? The dryad glanced at Dallion, then back at the woman.

Either of you.

The only thing we could. Vihrogon did a casual shrug. Run. besides, if that happens, the dragon will be the least of our worries. The emperor doesnt sound like the guy who goes anywhere without it. If theres a dragon, that would mean hell be riding it.

Use rockets, Dallion said. You can hurt him with those.

Maybe, but only if the emperor isnt there.

This marked the end of the conversation. Dallion could feel it in their emotions. All that remained was ironing out the details, but that they could do without him.

## **AREA AWAKENING**

Dallion slipped into the realm of his domain, then slid through it, surrounded by a bubble of reality. While he had full confidence in the creatures in the room, he chose not to share the final part of his plan. There was no doubt that he wanted to face Priscord again, yet it wasnt going to be in the south or the east. Instead, he was going to strike right in the heart of her new domain from the one place no one expectedthe forbidden north.

The minuscule domain that had been created once Dallion had removed his mansion from the imperial capital still remained. Its insignificant size and isolated location allowed it to remain overlooked. Bringing an army through it was going to be challenging in the best of circumstances, but a single person could use it to venture into Priscords domain with ease.

Are we going to fight? The young Aquilequia asked, flying next to Dallion with a bubble of her own. Clearly, being formed of Moon magic gave the familiar some useful abilities.

I am. Dallion didnt even look her way. Youll just watch.

Why?

Youre still young in your current form. When you get enough magic to level up, well have this conversation again.

The dragon snapped her jaw, then flashed, moving to the other side of Dallions reality bubble.

Im not that weak! she protested.

Are you stronger than Nox?

There was a moment of silence. In her former state, Aquilequia could claim to be dozens of times stronger. As things stood now, she couldnt even claim to be an equal match.

When you're as strong as Nox and Gleam, Ill consider it.

With a snarl, the dragon disappeared back into Dallions personal realm. No doubt she was going to challenge Nox to a fight. That was for the better. Both of them needed all the practice they could get for the fights to come.

Not to interrupt, dear boy, but might I suggest a change in your plans? Adzorgs voice sounded in Dallions mind.

You want me to give up?

*On the contrary. I think that attacking now is a splendid move. Itll let everyone know that youre not to be trifled with. In a free for all, its not the strongest that everyone fears, but the one who has no issue taking you down with him.*

What do you want me to change, then?

*The target. Attacking the Priscord province might be great at sending a message, but other than that, it holds no benefits. Her territory is exposed on all sides, sandwiched between the Tamin empire and the nymphs. The Academy will be a substantially better target.*

The Academy? Dallion didnt expect that. And they say that I hold grudges.

*My personal experience with the current archmage aside, the Shimmering Circle is the single thing that poses a direct threat, other than the world conquerors themselves.*

Come on. They couldnt deal with a few battle mages.

*Thats assuming that was their goal. Knowing what you know now, have you considered that the emperor might have been deliberately thinning the herd?*

He killed them?

*Maybe not personally, but have you noticed that the two of them who knew the emperor best of all were terrified of him? One created an enclave as far away from him as possible, and the other doesnt dare take any action without orders. With the exception of Katka, everyone else is dead one way or another.*

A chill ran down Dallions spine. Thinking back, he did remember guardians at the Learning Hall talking about another mage with empathy. With the pool being incredibly small, the only people they could be referring to were the archbishop, the emperor, or his aether echo. And the archbishop wasnt the type of person whod leave the safety of his island.

You really think they might turn into a problem?

*There still are a lot of powerful trinkets at the Academy, not to mention many young mages that could be puppeted. Thats precisely the hidden ace someone would use in a battle such as this. After all, didnt you play a few trump cards of your own to reach your current level, dear boy?*

Dallion indeed had. What was more, he could see Jeremy resorting to that. The man had already copied his and the archbishops methods of fighting, why not copy Tiallias use of symbiont echoes to make himself a squadron of mage puppets?

And Priscord? he asked. A surprise attack only works once. I wont be able to catch her off guard after this.

*You dont need to worry about that. As long as you make it clear youre involved in the battle at the Academy, she wont be able to resist joining in.*

Chapter 935: Academy Invasion

**DOMAIN INVASION**

**DOMAIN INVASION**

**DOMAIN INVASION**

Rectangles kept on flashing in front of Dallions eyes. The emperors attempts to kick him out of his domain were increasing. The first wave had been merely a test to probe the defenses. Since no immediate response had followed, Jeremy had pushed on with more settlements, wedging them within Dallions territory.

Both attacks were performed in perfect coordination. It was obvious that the emperor was leading Archduchess Priscord, who in turn had decided that the risk was worth the potential reward.

As Dallion flew from his domain in the north in the direction of the Academy, he concentrated on a top-down view of his domain. It wasnt so much looking as a general feeling of the dimensions changing. Moving settlements about had trained him to have a full sense of his territory.

Circles of nothing kept on eating into his domain as settlements with reasonably large populations invaded. Dallion could tell that they were soldier forts full of Priscords troops. The moment they got anywhere close to a settlement of his, they would rush out and attack outright. So far, they had captured three minor towns with minimal resistance.

**DOMAIN INVASION**

**You have increased your domain**

**The TOWN of GRIFFIN FORT has become part of your domain**

Another pair of rectangles popped up. Euryale had sprung into action, taking on one of the invading forts.

For a moment Dallion hesitated whether to get involved as well. If he made a push in the same area, he could well strand several of the invading forts, potentially commencing a counterattack.

No, the wiser part within him said. There would be time for that later. For the moment, all his focus had to be on the Academy.

Summoning three clay cylinders, Dallion cast three aether echoes and sent them to scout the general area he where remembered the Academy being. Adzorg had done a good job suggesting that as a target. In theory, the emperor could move its location like any other settlement. However, that wasnt entirely true for the Academy buildings. Having them remain so long at their original location had caused the magic lines of the area to thicken like roots taking hold. Moving the buildings would rip a large part of them out, severely limiting a lot of the spells that the mages took for granted. In a worst-case scenario, a series of wild vortexes could appear, turning the Academy into the vortex fields. The archbishop was probably aware of that, which was why he hadnt attempted to glass them with his magic rockets until now. That left the morsel ripe for the taking.

Veil, any trouble? Dallion asked through his domain.

You bet. Nothing we cant handle, the overseer replied. Shes using hunting troops.

*Actual hunters?*

*Nah, just the common riff-raff that we were volunteered to way back. Level twenty, all of them.*

That was somewhat strange. Provided that the emperor was still in possession of the skill altar, one would have assumed that hed boost the skill level of all his troops. Or maybe that was on purpose. After all, Priscords troops remained loyal to her, not the emperor himself.

Be ready, Gleam. Dallion summoned the shardfly near him.

You know they must have added a few extra illusions since our last visit, the creature said.

I see them, Aquilequia said in a smug manner. Being a great dragon, even when reduced to level one, had more advantages than the achievement had let on.

Dallion could feel the anger and bloodlust erupt from Gleam. It was the shardflys nature to face something strong, especially a dragon. Thankfully, she was loyal enough to keep herself from doing anything rash. After all, Dallion had promised her a go at the emperors great dragon in the near future.

*Its right over*

Before Aquilequia could finish, a purple beam of light erupted from below. Shattering the area illusion hiding it, it struck one of Dallions aether echoes, evaporating it on the spot.

Instinctively, Dallion thrust his harpsisword in the direction, sending a spark infused spiral attack. Dozens of aether barriers emerged in an attempt to block the attack. All they did was shatter one after the other, barely diminishing its power.

Careful, dear boy! Adzorg warned. There are buildings you dont want to destroy.

I know. Dallion split into fifty instances.

In sync, Dallions remaining two aether echoes performed a series of line attacks, scarring the ground below them. Chasms, several feet wide and hundreds of feet deep, covered the terrain,

breaking any illusions along their path. In the cases when buildings were destroyed, Dallion would ignore the instance, choosing one more appropriate.

Aqui, can you consume threads? Dallion asked.

Not directly. The dragon glided closer. Why?

No reason to waste a good opportunity.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

A purple rectangle flashed, then disappeared. It was immediately followed by a cluster of purple rays. Over half of Dallions instances were instantly vaporized, along with another one of his aether echoes. Alien was clearly not pulling any punches, making full use of the imperial rune golems entrusted to him. Curiously enough, there didnt seem to be any bladerers or battle mages.

Stop! Dallion shouted, mixing his music skill with magic.

There seemed to be a momentary pause. The new set of rays quickly made it clear that his attack wasnt as effective as he thought.

Theyre not letting any mages take part? Dallion wondered.

There might be a whole range of reasons, Adzorg explained. My guess would be that Alien is keeping them close at hand.

*Even the skilled ones?*

Choosing to push the archmage into action, Dallion landed on the ground on a cluster of magic concentration. Based on the intensity, there could be no doubt that a building of moderate importance had stood there in the near past.

Aqui! he shouted. Better learn this fast!

He reached into the ground and grabbed the threads of magic flowing through it. With measured strength and perfect precision, he pulled them out as if he were taking out a weed, careful not to have any threads snap. Once he had pulled enough of them, he tore them out with one brisk action. Losing their contact with the rest of the mesh, the magic threads merged together, forming a ball of pure magic.

Eat this, Dallion offered, bursting into another set of instances. It was a good thing too, for one ray vaporized that particular instance of him.

Damn it, Dallion thought. The golems were adapting to his actions.

The dragon sniffed the ball of magic like a cat. Her indecision might have been described as adorable if it didnt occur at the worst possible time. There was an option to have Gem assist, but that might prove rather risky. Aquilauias nature tended to be on the vicious side, same as Gleam.

Aqui. Dallion gently pushed her using his music skill.

Able to see the strands of music, the dragon still felt compelled to hurry up, gobbling the ball of magic in one bite.

**AQUILEQUIA has assimilated the MAGIC cluster.**

A purple rectangle flashed. Sadly, there was no mention of level increase. Even for a level one, the dragon required a lot more to advance. That wasn't the point, though.

Shards of hardened aether rained all over the ground, as Dallion's last aether copy cast a myriad of spells, providing him and the dragon with cover.

Did you understand the principle? Dallion asked as he pulled out another cluster of magic threads from the ground.

Yes. The dragon attempted a pout as she devoured the next ball of magic offered. I got it.

And just to prove it, she then sunk her teeth into the ground, draining an even larger amount.

**AQUILEQUIA has assimilated the MAGIC cluster.**

You know what to do, Dallion said, splitting into instances again. Gleam, watch over her.

Do I have to? The shardfly sighed like an older sister being denied a night out to look over her infant sibling. Even so, she did flutter close to the dragonlet, as did Dallion's aether echo.

Dallion performed another spiral attack. He'd already discovered a number of buildings, yet not the one he needed. Fortunately, the Learning Hall also wasn't among the revealed areas. As far as he could tell, he'd stumbled on one of the academy's libraries and the senior mage cluster. The latter had been transformed into a battle mage training area, with most of the previous occupants having gone rogue or finding refuge among influential provincial nobles.

It's always the rats that run first, Dallion thought as he summoned his new armadillo shield.

Gem, he said. Guard my back. Lux, help him. A dartbow wrapped in blue flames emerged as well.

Alright, boss. The aetherfish said, floating the shield to cover Dallion's back.

Lux followed, chirping instructions in his typically cheerful fashion.

I'd almost forgotten what this was like, Dallion said to himself. Sadly, there wasn't much time to reminisce. While the human mages were focusing all their effort on casting defensive spells, the golems were attacking in full force. At any single point several cast days of destruction indiscriminately in Dallion's direction, while dozens more were charging straight at him, as if that would make any difference. Done was the time when he would be intimidated by a twenty-foot entity made of stone with speed and reaction in the high eighties.

Music spark attack, Dallion thought as he slashed the air with his harpsword. Strands of music shot out, drilling through anything they came in contact with.



Just for good measure, Dallion followed up by a line strike with his aura sword, casting twenty spells as he did.

Use a bit more instances, Adzorg suggested. Even when observing near perfection, the old man had something to criticize about. You still could be a target for rockets.

**AQUILEQUIA has assimilated the MAGIC cluster, increasing her level to 2.**

Good work girl, Dallion praised as rune golems disintegrated by the dozens.

**MULTI KILL**

**(+2 Body, +2 Perception)**

**Killing twenty in one strike isnt anything special. Killing twenty entities with an awakened level of eighty, is.**

A kill achievement? For some reason that made Dallion think of his grandfather. He, too, had killed off dozens of similar levels. Did that mean he had earned that achievement as well during the Order of the Twelve Suns massacre?

Careful, boss! Lux chirped.

A wave of destruction came out from beneath the ground, vaporizing all but five of Dallions instances.

Instantly, Dallion split again, and just in time as more waves followed from beneath the ground.

**MAJOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 50%**

Even with all his effort, Dallion had still suffered a partial hit. A ray of purple had effectively severed both his feet. The pain was tremendous, though severely dulled by his high body level, as if he was having a tooth pulled with partial anesthetic.

An immediate soothing sensation followed, as the firebird moved the dartblade to where his legs were, transforming it into a pair of metal bowls.

Is everyone alright? Dallion looked about with his instances.

There was no trace of his echo, though Aquilequia and Gleam seemed unharmed, located on the only patch of land that remained unaffected.

Nymphs arent the only ones who can play tricks, the shardfly said. Looks like you lost a few inches.

Smiling at her humor, Dallion performed a series of spiral attacks directly below.

The ground tore, revealing hundreds of partial golems buried there. The designs seemed ancient something that must have been constructed during the first days of the Academy.

You really were planning things out forward, werent you? Dallion said out loud. Even back before Jeremy had openly rebelled he had set things up so nothing he had created would fall in enemy

hands. The capital, the Academy, and Moons know what else were nothing but expendable pawns that had served their purpose.

The realization sent chills throughout Dallions body. If the emperor was willing to use them here, hed be willing to destroy every structure of the Academy, people included.

Damn it! A hundred instances of Dallion darted straight down. Unsummoning both his blades, he reached forward in an attempt to come in contact with the ground as fast as possible.

## **AREA AWAKENING**

### Chapter 936: Familiar Guardians

Reality shifted, transforming into an endless forest of purple glowing vines among green and yellow trees. Minuscule creatures of all shapes and sizes flew about. To the untrained eye they seemed charming, even beautiful, yet they were all parasites taking advantage of the richness of magic threads for sustenance. They werent the problem, though. Other entities were also present in forceaether golems.

Summoning a clay cylinder, Dallion unleashed a ray of destruction, shattering hundreds of the crimson-purple constructs like glass. The spell was followed by a spark infused spiral attack directly below.

**Realm section damaged!**

**Overall completion 78%**

Large chunks of land erupted at the impact, transforming into clouds of dirt high up in the air. Thankfully, there didnt seem to be any more golems hidden in the soil.

Seventy-eight, Dallion said as he gently floated to the ground. Mages really dont maintain anything, do they?

The life of academia is filled with its own challenges, dear boy, Adzorg protested, practically admitting the statement. Thats a domain rulers job.

I suppose it is.

Dallion looked at his feet. They were there, along with his shoes and the lower part of his trousers. Nothing seemed to be wrong with them, yet this was only a fake projection. In the real world, they no longer existed.

*Theres no reason to be alarmed. With your magic and body levels, you should be able to have them restored in a matter of months. Until then, youll just have to use aether stand-ins, or even a good illusion, if you prefer.*

Dallion considered it. If there was someone whod know, that would be Adzorg. The mage had his hands severed not too long ago. Looking at him now, no one would be able to guess that they had been gradually restored over the course of months.

## **REALM INVASION**

Red rectangles filled the sky.

Seems like theyve taken me seriously. Dallion stood up. His real-life troubles would have to wait.

*Knowing Alien, he probably only modified the golems to treat you as an intruder. The area guardian must have stepped in.*

Doesnt the emperor control this? Or an overseer?

The Academy has always been sort of different, dear boy, Adzorg explained. While we serve the emperor, were technically autonomous.

Like the Order.

To a certain degree. Think of this realm as isolated. Thats why moving it around isnt as easy as moving everything else. Due to the magic concentration and frequent experiments, the area has become more susceptible to other worlds. Thats why I did my experiments here its far easier to break through the protective barrier here than elsewhere. Well, except the fallen south, possibly. The old mage added with a brief laugh. To prevent anything spilling out into the rest of Tamins domain, the Academy is isolated from everything else.

That shouldnt stop him from coming here in case he wants to, Dallion said.

*Not in the least. That doesnt make it desirable, though.*

That was a strange statement. There were too many benefits for the emperor not to get involved. Even if he were afraid that someone might do what he had done to the archbishop. Either way, the faster Dallion could take control of the domain, the better. He knew he couldnt keep it, but that wouldnt prevent him from transporting a few pieces to his own territory. As for what was left, hed make sure that no one could take advantage of it in the future.

Aqui, he said within his personal realm.

The orange-scaled dragon emerged within seconds. Ten times larger than in the real world, she was doing her best to present herself larger than she actually was. Even so, her present level was clearly visible should anyone look at her white rectangle.

Grasped the concept of eating? Dallion looked at her.

The large dragon snarled.

Can you do it from within the realm?

The anger changed into bewilderment.

No one can consume magic from within a realm, she said defensively. Dallion knew for a fact that wasnt the case. He himself had done so many times and he wasnt the only one.

What about outside? How fast can you drain the area of magic?

Why? She lowered her head, bringing it to Dallions level.

Im going to do something and when I do, well have to get out of here quickly.

The dragon snorted right at Dallion.

It would be nice if you can reach level ten at least.

Pride filled the dragons body, as blue blobs the size of houses emerged within her. There was no way that she would only level up to such a low level. Of course, Dallions subtle use of music skills had also helped in the making of the decision.

Before anyone could say anything more, a cluster of aether cones flew straight at him. Free of the confines of reality, the armadil shield teleported between him and the projectiles, growing three times its size.

Unable to counter the force, Gem was pushed back dozens of feet to the point it reached Dallion himself. Extending one hand, the otherworlder easily countered the attack.

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

Aquilequia, on her part, had used her natural speed to move away before the cones even got close.

Best leave. He said, glancing at her new location. After Im done, Ill need you to be at least as strong as this.

The dragon didnt respond, yet didnt leave the realm, either. Curious as every low-level companion, she moved a safe distance away, eager to see exactly what was referred to. Meanwhile, Dallion sprang into action. With speed surpassing that of Aquilequia, he dashed around the shield, heading straight for the source of the aether cones. To little surprise, they were being released from five spell circles, at huge intensity. More curious was the entity that had cast them.

## **LEARNING HALL GUARDIAN**

**Species: COPYETTE**

**Class: SHADOW**

**Health: 78%**

**Traits:**

**- BODY 45**

**- MIND 60**

**- REACTION 55**

**- PERCEPTION 50**

**- MAGIC 100**

**Skills:**

**- ATTACK**

**- GUARD**

**- ACROBATICS**

**- SCHOLAR**

**- CARVING**

- MUSIC

- SPELLCRAFT

**Weakness: NONE**

Never thought you'd be a copyette, Dallion said as he performed a series of slashes targeting vital points on the guardian.

Each of them hit, yet instead of red rectangles, the form transformed into cyan sludge that splashed onto the ground.

Lucky coincidence? Dallion split into instances, using his music skills to add doubt and weight into his words. Or were you working for the Order all this time?

Nice to see you too, apprentice. A new figure formed. It was very different from the first, taking on the form of Alien. Spell circles formed in different spots hundreds of feet from Dallion, each releasing anything from lightning to aether shards.

Despite the overwhelming amount, not a single one of Dallion's instances got harmed. Performing a three-sixty line attack with his harpsword, he sliced through the new appearance of the guardian, breaking the spell circles in the process.

Dont be overconfident, Giaccia said. Experience trumps level every time.

There was no way Dallion could disagree. There was a time when he, too, had defeated opponents many levels above him. While it was said that a ten-level difference was insurmountable, the guardian was a copyette with a very high magic trait.

You can always surrender, Dallion said, looking in all directions with his instances.

Its just like you to offer. Two forms of the guardian appeared in different locations, now taking on the forms of children in Dallion's class. And no, Im not working for Simon, even if he put me here.

Dallion dashed, appearing next to one of his former classmates, slicing it to bits using a multi attack.

Wrong one. The other form laughed.

Dallion was fully aware that both of them were wrong. His real goal was to try and figure out where the rest of the guardian was hiding. As a copyette, he could create dozens of copies, all an insignificant part of his overall body. Destroying each individual one wouldn't do anything; harming the one considered the main one might.

Hes stalling for time, Giaccia said.

Your music attacks are rather good. Two more copyette forms emerged. Sadly, it doesn't depend on me. You'll have to deal with the main guardian for that. Im just here to obtain information. Being a hunter, you should know that.

Its been a while since I was a hunter, Dallion replied. Im not an apprentice, either.

Thats true. You made full mage, didnt you? Also, I heard that you were an archduke shortly before rebelling. Quite the achievement.

Yeah, yeah. Im just like my grandfather. Dallion let it slip.

Your grandfather? Confusion emanated from the copyette. I was about to say that youre like Jeremy. A lot more straightforward, to be sure, but the drive is there along with the skill.

Going by large areas, there had to be roughly ten guardians responsible for the realm. Defeating them would effectively make Dallion the new owner. A faster and more challenging way, though, was taking on the main guardian.

No time to hesitate, the harpsisword Guardian reminded Dallion.

It would be a lie to say that Dallion wasnt. Even with all the copyettes tricks, he had enough raw power to defeat the guardian, destroying a large part of the realm in the process. It was no accident that of all the key guardians, this one had been sent to reveal his skills. Dallion had spent a significant part of his life in the Learning Hall. While not particularly long in terms of time, it had marked a significant change in Dallions life. Before that he was little more than a skill game piecebarely defeating the Star, he was on the run from Countess Priscord, and in debt to the void. His life at the learning hall of the Academy had elevated him to the point that the emperor, the Order, and even the Moons themselves had taken notice.

Yes. Dallion sighed. Theres no time for hesitation.

Summoning his aura sword, he slashed the air, casting a flight spell that propelled him up like a rocket. Half a mile above the ground, he stopped.

Sorry, Learning Hall, he said, slashing the air in what appeared to be a multi attack. Magic symbols and connections were drawn, yet instead of casting multiple five-circle spells, Dallion cast one complex spell chain.

A vortex of spell circles emerged beneath him, shooting bolts of magic draining lightning.

**Realm section damaged!**

**Overall completion 77%**

**Realm section damaged!**

**Overall completion 76%**

Red rectangles popped up as the ground became covered in craters. Aether projectiles shot up to him in response, most of them blocked by the aether shield before reaching Dallion himself.

Thanks, but no need, Dallion unsummoned the shield, unwilling to have it be accidentally affected by his magic draining spell.

**CRITICAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

A few purple rectangles appeared among the mass of red. At the current rate, the Learning Hall guardian would be defeated in a matter of seconds. Hopefully, there would be enough left for Dallion to restore afterwards. Were this to be the Halls realm, there would be no concern on the matterdefeating a guardian merely improved it. In this case, the realm was the Academy, though, not the Learning Hall itself.

Suddenly, a sun gold colossus emerged less than a few hundred feet away. A massive hand reached out and grabbed the vortex from beneath Dallion. Sparks of lightning enveloped the fingers, yet had no effect whatsoever.

A second hand reached for Dallion himself, but he had already darted further back, safely avoiding the attack.

So, thats the Academy? Dallion looked at the glittering mountain of gold. When it came to the colossus, he shared many of the same characteristics. The one major difference was the colossus attire. Not the usual Roman-Greek design that Dallion had seen before, the design followed twenty century Earth norms.

Its been ages since a domain ruling mage has ventured in this realm, the colossus said in a booming voice. Youre the second so far.

What happened to the first? Dallion concentrated. Not a single domain marker appeared anywhere along the guardians body.

He created this area and made sure that no other mage will be able to take it.

Chapter 937: The Golden Mountain

#### **ACADEMY GUARDIAN**

**Species: COLOSSUS**

**Class: ELECTRON**

**Health: 64%**

**Traits:**

- **BODY 150**
- **MIND 80**
- **REACTION 95**
- **PERCEPTION 50**

**Skills:**

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **ACROBATICS**
- **ATHLETICS**

**Weakness: EARS**

An all-out fighter... there could be no doubt that the colossus had been created specifically for this purpose. It was very possible that the emperor had somehow removed all the needless skills during the leveling up process. The choice of material was no accident, either. Combining sun gold with

another magic metal to negate the effects of magic was just what someone distrustful of mages would do.

This had to be a secret that even the archbishop didn't know, otherwise there'd be more examples of it. A metal that rendered a target impervious to magic. Quite a feat, unless the person who had discovered it also happened to be a mage.

It must have been quite the dilemma for you, Jeremy, Dallion thought, amused.

Given enough time, Dallion might uncover the exact composition of the alloy and make use of it. For the moment, his goal was to defeat the colossus.

Flying up to the guardian itself, Dallion performed a dual spiral attack. His harpsisword, as usual, was infused with magic, while the aura sword had magic threads within its blow.

Taking advantage of its high body trait, the guardian swiftly moved to the side. Despite being enormous, the body easily managed to evade the most devastating effects of the attack.

## **MINOR STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage has been increased by 10%**

The spiral attack barely singed the chest of the being, while the magic attack bounced off, completely repelled.

“Have you fought anything like this before?” Dallion asked, filling the air with spark infused line attacks.

The glowing threads of destruction sliced through the vines and vegetation of the realm like a scythe through grass. Unfortunately, none of them managed to touch the Colossus.

Without warning, one of the being's massive fists blocked out the sky, flying straight towards Dallion. Thanks to his reaction trait, Dallion was able to spot the attack. His body movements alone would have been too slow to escape, but thankfully the flying spell he had cast was affected by thought alone.

For half a second Dallion flew back, the colossus' fist mere feet away from him. Aether barriers appeared by the dozen, cast by a single slash of Dallion's aura sword. All of them were shattered, not even remotely slowing down the guardian's attack. Finally, after what felt like minutes, the distance from the golden knuckles widened.

Leave it to the emperor to come up with something like this, Adzorg said, almost with admiration. The perfect counter for a mage. With such a high body trait and invulnerability to magic, there wouldn't be anyone capable of stopping it.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Dallion snapped. Yet, even he had to admit that the counter was perfect. Remove spells from a mage and they become extraordinarily weak. Even the noble exceptions would hesitate, which was more than enough time for the guardian to dispatch them.

A relatively safe distance away, Dallion cast a series of spells to boost his speed and strength. Once done, he followed up with a quick spell to create an aether blade. The new weapon was quickly covered with a series of illusion spells with the goal of removing the colossus magic invulnerability.



Splitting into two hundred instances, Dallion darted back down, then thrust the blade straight at the guardian's chest. The enhanced speed prevented the being from evading the attack. Unfortunately, that was all it did. The aether blade shattered, turning to dust the moment it came into contact with the sun gold alloy.

"You're skilled," the guardian admitted as he went on a multi attack, attempting to snatch Dallion from the air.

The actions were fast and precise, not to mention covering a vast range. It was purely thanks to the large number of instances that Dallion managed to retreat into the sky unharmed.

"The most skilled I've seen," he added, leaping into the air.

Suddenly, the distance between the two disappeared.

## **MAJOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 50%**

Dallion felt the hard surface slam into him, sending him flying miles away. Normally, that could be considered as a good thing, but a colossus of this size and speed could easily catch up to him no matter where he was thrown.

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

Lux! Dallion thought.

Without needing further instructions, the firebird emerged, wrapping Dallion with its blue flames and propelling him up, faster than even the colossus could manage.

That was too close. If it hadn't been the few moments in which Lux had healed Dallion back in the real world, the battle would have been over. Right now, Dallion was barely at one percent of his health. The only times he'd fallen so low were back in the first awakening shrine. There, losing only meant being ejected from the realm. As a domain ruler, if he were to have his health depleted, he'd die on the spot.

"Better than your creator?" Dallion shouted—a desperate move to make use of his music skills. To his great surprise, it worked.

Several strands attached to the guardian as he fell back to the ground with a slam. The entire realm shook.

"Better than he was when he created this realm," the guardian replied. "Even I was weaker when I chose to become the realm's guardian. You could have taken me easily. My skin was granite and my speed, just over half what it is now."

Focusing, Dallion skimmed over the surface of the mountain, using his forging skills in an attempt to spot any crack or weakness he could use. If any existed, they had been mended centuries ago. It was obvious that the emperor had kept improving the guardian multiple times, but it was more than that. During the improvement, he had changed the material until reaching its current composition.

There was no telling how many times he had gone through it. Reaching simple gold was a difficult task. Achieving any of the magical materials required magic forging, and even it was not a given.

You know its weakness, don't you? Dallion wondered. There was no way Jeremy would allow anything, be it a guardian, to be stronger than him. There had to be some weakness—a blind spot that only he could take advantage of.

With the music strands fading away, the effects ended, sending the guardian up again as he attempted to reach Dallion yet again.

There was no doubt that Lux had taken him dozens of miles above the ground, but that alone was not enough. Dallion felt the sky itself move down, bringing the ground closer. Had this been an overseer, the fight might well have ended. As things stood, there were several possibilities for success.

“Here we go!” Reaching through his personal realm into his wider domain, Dallion summoned a rocket crossbow. Although the colossus had the power to reflect all spells, he didn't have the power to negate them.

The massive weapon emerged in front of him, already loaded with four deadly charges. Dallion held his breath. Waiting for the colossus to get fifty feet from him, he shot all four rocket bolts straight at the guardian's head and shoulders.

**MINOR HIT**

**Dealt damage has been increased by 50%**

**MINOR HIT**

**Dealt damage has been increased by 50%**

**MODERATE HIT**

**Dealt damage has been increased by 150%**

**MINOR HIT**

**Dealt damage has been increased by 50%**

The force of the blast pushed the colossus back down before he could reach his target. All the speed he had was wasted into the air.

**Realm section damaged!**

**Overall completion 59%**

The entity slammed into the ground, sending a shock wave throughout the entire realm. Ripples formed through the mesh of magic threads that composed the ground, slowly settling once they reached its limits.

Unsummoning the weapon, Dallion immediately replaced it with a new one.

Once the dust had settled, the results were a lot less impactful as he had hoped. Some might even call them underwhelming.

In the real world, such an attack would have been enough to destroy living armor. Here, they had merely scarred the guardian. The most serious wound—located slightly above the shoulder—was barely the size of a jab. As for the rest—they were just scars.

“Jeremy must have improved you a lot.” Dallion resorted to his music skills. In his mind, he knew that this was the method, yet he had to rely on the colossus’ weakness. “How many times did you go through this?”

“Why do you want this domain?” The guardian stood back up. “It won’t increase your level.”

“If it’s so useless, why not just surrender and give it to me without a fight?” Dallion smirked.

The colossus didn’t react.

“See? It only doesn’t matter as long as you have it. We both know that no one will allow so much magic to go unused.”

“You just want to feed your dragon.”

“I’m sure that Jeremy did the same.” In his mind Dallion was calculating possibilities of how to get the guardian to face the right direction so he could initiate a killing shot.

“He did, but you’re greedier.”

The response was surprising on several levels. When he said it, Dallion didn’t believe it to have been true. According to everything he had learned in the Learning Hall, the first Emperor Tamin had transformed his companion familiar into a great dragon, through lots of magic and leveling up. Nowhere was it said that the entire domain of the Academy had been used as a grazing ground. Yet, that would explain why the area was so sparsely built in relation to its size.

## **MAJOR HEAL**

**Your health has been increased by 50%**

A green rectangle emerged. Lux had managed to restore a large chunk of Dallion’s health, and not a moment too soon.

“Get me to his ear,” Dallion ordered, bursting into instances.

Hundreds of versions circled the guardian’s head, yet each time the result was the same. The Colossus’ speed was just too fast for Dallion to do anything about it, even with his magic boost. Of two hundred instances, forty-one managed to get anywhere close to the guardian’s head. Less than a third of them managed to fire, and in all those cases, the guardian twisted his head, causing the rockets to explode on his face. Damage was dealt, though it was a far cry from the kill shot that Dallion needed.

“Jeremy used that millennia ago.” The colossus grabbed a patch of ground and threw it in Dallion’s general direction.

The speed was impressive, fading half of Dallion's newly created instances.

"He did, did he?" Dallion unsummoned the empty crossbow. "Then how about something new?"

Summoning his usual two blades, Dallion spun in the air, casting point attacks throughout the realm.

"Predictable." The colossus dashed from one place to another, using his left arm to shield himself from the magic attacks, while avoiding the spark infused ones. "Jeremy used that twice."

Not quite this, Dallion thought.

The issue with someone incapable of seeing magic was that they couldn't tell the difference between a destructive and an effect spell. A large part of the aether point attacks were not mere attacks, but effect spells surrounding a small magic core. Coming into contact with the threads on the ground, they changed into symbols, patiently waiting to be connected. There was no way for the guardian to see that, and because of the devastation to which the area had been submitted, there wasn't anyone nearby to tell him.

Got you! Dallion said to himself, completing the magic circle. It extended for miles, only visible from high above. The effect, though, was something no one could miss.

In a split second, the ground that the guardian had been running on lost its firmness. With a massive splash, the colossus vanished beneath the surface, like a carriage falling through thin ice into a river.

Chapter 938: Fall of the Mage Academy

Got you, Dallion thought, casting a new series of spells that drew hardened runes on the ground.

The ground solidified just when one of the colossus' hands reached out. In normal circumstances, it would be a given that a non-magic creature couldn't escape from this trap. Unfortunately, there was one minor detail that had eluded Dallion. Despite not being an overseer, the colossus remained the prime guardian of the realm. As such, nothing—including the ground—would keep him imprisoned for long.

After a brief pause, the hand kept on rising, as if sliding along wet clay. Not a single magic thread or speck of earth attached to it.

Unsummoing his weapons, Dallion pulled out two rocket crossbows, firing both on the spot he estimated the colossus' head would appear.

The ground erupted like a volcano.

**MODERATE HIT**

**Dealt damage has been increased by 150%**

**MODERATE HIT**

**Dealt damage has been increased by 150%**

## CRITICAL HIT

### **Dealt damage has been increased by 200%**

Three strikes out of eight? Not at all what Dallion had hoped for. To make matters worse, they were all superficial wounds.

Splitting into hundreds of instances, Dallion spread out, casting aether barriers in front of each.

Chunks of earth slammed into half of them, shattering everything in the process. Clearly, magic wasn't the answer. What Dallion could do, though, was return to the basics.

As he concentrated, a series of guard markers appeared, showing him how to evade the incoming projectiles. The options were so many that they were visible as a solid chunk of green, stacked one over the other.

Compared to what he'd become used to dealing in combat as a domain ruler, it all seemed so simple now. Combining guard and acrobatics let him evade half a dozen in less than a second. Doing so caused time to slow down.

"Easy," Dallion said. He had forgotten how fun this was. There was no longer any need for him to follow the guard markers, but he did so anyway, more out of a sense of nostalgia than anything else.

Sequence after sequence was complete until time completely stopped. In the past, that would have been enough. The situation now was a bit more complicated. With all the chunks of earth in the air, Dallion had no direct line of attack. Even the colossus itself wasn't fully visible. That left only one solution—doing a spiral attack.

An area of the air was immediately cleared as the flow of time returned to normal. Dallion didn't delay, flying straight into another section full of projectiles, where he repeated the process.

Time slowed down, then stopped again, only this time the guardian's head was fully visible.

Good approach, Adzorg said. You'll still need one more to get to a good point of attack.

"Maybe," Dallion replied.

He'd be forced to go further back to find a spot which still had earth fragments in the air, but it wasn't impossible. His mind raced through options, coming with the optimal solution. Even after all this time, his gamer instincts urged him to go for the direct kill. There was a good chance that he'd manage it, too.

No, he told himself. There was no time for ego fulfillment. Using the time freeze, Dallion flew to the optimal location from which to start a third guard sequence series.

If the colossus had caught on to what he was doing, he didn't show it, for he didn't move his head, which well could have happened. A moment later, it was already too late—time had frozen again and Dallion had a perfect view of the guardian's ear lobe and especially the external auditory canal.

“Just like an awakening trial,” Dallion said.

It was just like the Moons had told him—trials didn’t end with him. Everything up to level eighty was nothing more than a tutorial, preparing him for the real deal. Back then, each trial was a problem that came with a solution he had to find. In real life, he was given the skills to make solutions himself.

“Sorry.” Dallion focused on the target, then performed a spark infused point attack.

#### **TERMINAL HIT**

**Dealt damage has been increased by 1000%**

That was it. A green glow covered the gold surface of the colossus, causing him to disintegrate into a cloud of fading particles.

Making use of his abilities, Dallion skimmed through the improvement options. None of the materials were anything better than the colossus’ current composition, so he chose to leave it as it was.

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

**The GUARDIAN of ACADEMY has submitted to your power.**

**You are the owner of the land of ACADEMY.**

The coveted rectangle emerged, informing Dallion he had achieved his goal. It hadn’t come without its cost. While things were rather well within the realm, in the real world, he was still missing his feet. Fortunately, as a mage, they weren’t vital for battle or movement.

**ACADEMY Level not increased due to lack of inhabitants**

**5000000 inhabitants required for ACADEMY to improve further**

**The CAPITAL CITY remains Level 13**

“Capital city?” Dallion asked. “I never knew there were so many mages.”

Things change, Adzorg replied with a sigh. According to the records,

*the Academy didn’t start out as a purely magic settlement. There were common people who lived there as well. Mostly servants, soldiers, and their families.*

One could gather as much, but to have several million people was a far cry from the few thousands that remained there today.

With the city under his control, Dallion was instantly able to sense everything within it. He could sense the guardians, the people, even the tens of thousands of golems buried beneath the ground. The emperor had made sure to keep them separate from the domain itself, making it impossible for Dallion to control them. However, he was able to control pretty much everything else.

**LEARNING HALL has been added to the land of Sandstorm.**

**PRISON BASEMENT has been added to the land of Sandstorm.**

**ARCHMAGE ARCHIVE has been added to the land of Sandstorm.**

Dallion moved the three buildings out of his new realm.

“Anything else you’d recommend, Adzorg?” he asked.

I’d say my old laboratory, but that would be wishful thinking, the old mage sighed. No, nothing comes to mind, unless you want to have a few fancy high mage buildings.

“No. I can make better ones.” Most of them were falling apart anyway, purely maintained through layers of illusions.

Dallion hesitated whether to also take the battle mage training building. For a while, it had been his home. Then again, that wasn’t a part of his life he felt a great attachment to.

Now, there was only one thing left to do. On further reflection, there were two. To Dallion’s surprise, he sensed the presence of three particular people in his new domain. For some reason, they had remained here during his attack, refusing to flee. Or, most likely, they hadn’t gotten the chance.

Alien, Dallion thought.

Adzorg had warned him that taking the Shimmering Circle straight on might be more difficult than he imagined. Yet, that was before Dallion had gained control of the domain. Now, he controlled the land itself, along with everything in it.

All three of the otherworlders were in the archmage’s complex, protected by layers of spells and a small contingent of golems. The golems Dallion could do nothing about, but the spells could easily be dispelled.

Shifting realms, Dallion went into the complex, where he flew directly to the embodiment of the created spells. The majority were illusions, filling the air like floating spiderwebs. There were also a number of defense and attack spells, portrayed as perfectly cut aether crystals with magic symbols within.

“Any of those yours?” Dallion asked, shattering one before Adzorg had a chance to respond.

The crystal cracked, then imploded into itself, blinking out of existence.

*A few. I wasn’t too involved with this place.*

“Then I don’t need to be careful.”

Using his harpsisword, Dallion did a three sixty spark infused slash, cutting through hundreds of spells and illusions. He repeated the process again and again, until there wasn’t a single spell left.

*A bit harsh, don’t you think, dear boy?*

“You can’t live surrounded by illusions all the time,” Dallion replied. “Time to have a chat with an old friend.”

There always was the option to pull the archmage and the rest of the circle directly into the realm, but Dallion chose to appear to them, instead. As he did, the sharp pain in his legs quickly reminded him of reality.

“What the—” Alien began, but before he could finish, the floor encircled his feet. Spikes extended from the floor aiming for his hands. They didn’t cause any damage, rather encased them in stone, preventing any spells from being cast.

Katka and Eleria got the same treatment. Unlike Alien, though, they didn’t struggle, aware of the skill difference.

“It’s been a while, Dallion said, as the archmage’s chair slid away from its usual spot up to him. “Nice to see you’re well.” He turned to Eleria. “I was afraid the dragons might have harmed you.”

The woman didn’t reply.

“This is pointless.” Katka showed the greatest amount of guts. “I’ve already made a vow not to harm you, remember?”

“Oh, right.” The floor binding her returned to normal. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“Harm me and the emperor will tear you—” Alien began.

A scroll on his desk unfolded, then flew right at him, severing his left hand. Screams filled the room for a moment, before Dallion cast a silence spell to counter them.

“You should be able to take care of that,” he said, retaining a stoic impression. Deep inside, he disapproved of what he was doing. Even after everything, Alien was a person and from Earth. At the same time, there was no way that Dallion could let him go unpunished. “Oh, right.” He waved his hand. A green sphere of light emerged around the wound. “You can’t cast spells right now.”

“What do you intend?” Eleria asked. “Kill us?”

“That depends entirely on you. I can’t let you fight against me, so a Moon vow will do.”

The woman hesitated.

“Or I can just kill you.”

The choice made for her, the woman could only go forward with it.

“I vow never to attack you or what is yours, be it with spells or other means,” she said reluctantly. “Is that good enough?”

The spikes went back into the floor, freeing her.

“Quite. Katka, if you could add that as well?” Dallion turned to her. “Just in case.”

“Fine.” His former superior rolled her eyes. “I vow never to attack you or what is yours, be it with spells or other means. Happy?”



Her tone forced a smile to appear on Dallion's face.

"I've missed your attitude," he admitted. "You're free to go. Give the emperor my regards if you see him."

"Just like that?" Emelia asked.

"Just like that. The world is different when you're a domain ruler. You should have tried it."

"That's only a privilege those born without magic get to choose."

"You didn't have to rely just on magic." Dallion frowned.

"I know. But the temptation was too great."

Transforming into a puff of clouds, the woman flew out of the room. She was quickly followed by Katka who merely used a standard flight spell. That left Dallion alone with Alien.

"So, Archmage—" Dallion ended the silence spell "—how about we catch up? So much has happened since my last visit."

Gritting his teeth, Alien glared at Dallion, pure hatred and fear emanating from him. As expected, the fear was far greater.

"What does the emperor have you doing now?"

"He'll kill you," the man spat. "He'll come here and kill you!"

"I'm already at war with the emperor and not just the echo sitting on his throne. Killing you won't change that one way or another."

The archmage's eyes widened. The hatred was gone, leaving only fear behind.

"You actually thought I didn't know?" Dallion laughed. "I guess he doesn't tell you everything. I spoke with him at the glass mounts, in case you think I'm lying. He told me what he usually did to otherworlders. To be honest, he might even thank me once I've dealt with you."

Chapter 939: Magic Piggybank

**AQUILEQUIA has assimilated the MAGIC cluster, increasing her level to 7.**

Without anything to fight or evade, the dragon was doing a rather good job of increasing her level. It would be a while before she got to a point to rival Aurun, but every bit helped. Besides, it wasn't like Dallion was hurrying.

Beneath the ground, rocks hardened, destroying the hidden golems one at a time. The constructs were sturdy enough to withstand any standard attack, but with enough illusion spells, anything could be changed.

"So," Dallion turned to Alien, "where are you from?"

The old mage stared at him, confusion flickering through the pain and fear.

“Back on Earth, I mean.”

Only now did he realize that otherworlders hardly ever asked that question. Even now, he did it more as a means to pass time than out of any real interest. Given the number of such interactions he himself had held so far, the only conclusion was that the Moons discouraged the conversation in some fashion.

“Centennial,” the archmage spat out. “Centennial, Colorado.”

“Know nothing about it.”

“You won’t gain anything by torturing me. The emperor is a lot stronger than you’ll ever be.”

“That’s debatable. Though, interesting that you haven’t made a Moon vow. I thought that was the way things went.”

“Moon vows limit people. Didn’t my old teacher tell you that?” A smile formed on Alien’s face. “Even in this world, you can’t have everything. It’s either skill or loyalty.”

“Don’t know about loyalty, but you definitely don’t have the skills. I guess that’s why they put you in charge of the circle.”

“I improved the rockets!” the man shouted. “They were nothing before. Firecrackers that carried spells.”

“History begs to differ.”

“You think that the addict came up with the idea?” Clearly, the archbishop wasn’t viewed in high regard among anyone in Jeremy’s camp. “He stole that from me! He’s been alive for millennia and all he could do was the crap you’re using now.”

“Sure, he stole your idea centuries before—”

Dallion stopped. Strangely enough, it was possible. What was more, it was well within Simon’s means. The ability to see into the future made time irrelevant. True, the echoes were distorted and there was never a guarantee that things would end up as they were originally planned, but if he had focused on the emperor’s design, it was possible for him to have recreated an event centuries before it had happened. No wonder he was constantly on the lookout for Moonstones.

“I can help you too,” Alien pleaded. “Just don’t kill me and let me go.”

So much for loyalty, Dallion thought.

“I can give you something you need.”

Surprisingly, truth resonated within the man’s words.

“You aren’t afraid of what the emperor would do to you?”

“There are four powers in the world. Making you stronger will also weaken the other two opposing him.”

The logic was sound, though Dallion strongly suspected that Alien was begging for his life in a calculated way. No doubt what he was offering was of marginal significance at best, so the emperor didn't care.

“Moonstones!” the mage said, noticing Dallion's hesitation. “I'll give you Moonstones.”

That definitely got Dallion's attention. Standing up, he floated up to Alien.

“You've felt the power they contain. With them you could restore your legs, you'd be able to understand spells no one else can.”

“If that's true, why haven't you used them yourself? You could have defeated me easily.”

There was no answer.

“I'm tired of your lies.” Dallion turned around.

“I'm not lying! They're in this very room, but without my help, you'll only destroy them. That way, no one will have them.”

So, that was the game: Alien's freedom in exchange for a power boost, if he could be believed, of course. Dallion weighed the options. He'd be a fool to refuse at this stage of the war, although it still bothered him that anyone would offer this much for no reason. The archmage had to be terrified about his life, and convinced that Dallion would take it.

Adzorg, what do you think? Dallion asked in his realm.

I'd say it's possible, but that doesn't make it true, the old mage replied. It's easy to lock something within a domain and make it break should it be entered in a way it's not supposed to be. The practice is terribly risky, though. In most cases, the realm is destroyed for no apparent reason whatsoever.

*Do you think I should take the chance?*

*It's difficult to say. Knowing him, I'd pass. I gave him a rather good education on constructing prison items, after all.*

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

The normal thing was to refuse. At the same time, every trap could be sprung without enough power. If Dallion couldn't deal with this, could he be expected to win in a one-to-one against Jeremy, or anyone else for that matter?

“Alright,” he said. “I vow to let you go unharmed, provided you tell me how to obtain the gems in a way that I won't end up dead, imprisoned, or harmed.” He turned around again. “Can you vow to that?”

There was a suspiciously long moment of silence.

“Yes,” Alien said at last.

“Good.” The room released the archmage. “So, where are they?”

“I need a Vermillion ring. Give me that and I’ll show you.”

That wasn’t in the initial bargain. Dallion could think of a dozen ways how that could be used to harm him. He had seen it happen to a member of the Shimmering Circle not too long ago.

“You’ve vowed not to harm me, remember?” Dallion removed the Vermillion ring hanging on his neck. “Mind control is harming.”

“Just give it here.” The other hissed through gritted teeth, though didn’t dare snatch it from Dallion’s hand outright.

“Here.” Dallion tossed it at him.

He imagined that Alien would go to one of the items shrouded with illusion magic and do something. There was no way it could be hidden within the building itself. Since Dallion had destroyed the illusion spells in the realm of the archmage’s complex, things had ceased to be as glamorous as before. Gone was the giant room of opulent statues, finely crafted wall furniture, and chandeliers of light. And while there weren’t cracks anywhere, Dallion wouldn’t have rented such a place unless he was given no choice.

Unexpectedly, the archmage slid on the ring, then turned his hand palm up. A rough crimson gem emerged.

“You?” Dallion’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second.

“I told you it’s within the room.” The other said. “If you had killed me, they would have been destroyed.”

“You’re Jeremy’s piggybank. That’s why you were never worried he might kill you.”

“There are worse things than death, as you well know.” A second red gem emerged. “But no, that’s not the reason. And as for your earlier question—I made a vow never to use any of them unless specifically ordered by the emperor.”

“Always the loophole.”

“It was a necessity.” A cyan gem joined the other two. “You actually think you can win, don’t you?” He glanced at Dallion.

“I’ve done well so far.”

“Jeremy isn’t like anyone else. In some ways, he’s like you, if you had a few more centuries of experience. In all historical scrolls, the archbishop was said to be the strongest of them all. Well, it wouldn’t be described that way. Simon never

liked the spotlight." A white gem emerged. "How did the saying go? There are many strong countries out there, but only the Order controls the world." Alien let out a cough. "It used to be like that. The moment someone steps out of line, the Order and half the world would fall onto him like a ton of bricks. Simon had copyettes in all the right places, so he was, in effect, pulling everyone's strings. However, there was one fatal weakness."

"What does he do if there are no countries left," Dallion said.

"Precisely. He was so confident in his prophecies and his copyettes that he never thought that the situation could spiral out of control. The emperor was the one who spotted the weakness and slowly exploited it without anyone noticing. You and others like you were nothing but bright distractions in the global game of chess."

A total of eight Moonstones had amassed in Alien's hand, most of them red.

"Your task was to keep him from getting Moonstones," Dallion noted.

"One of them." Alien walked up to Dallion, offering the stones.

Rarely had Dallion seen so much power in one spot. They were a lot smaller than the dragon heart, but size didn't always matter when it came to power. With just half of them, Aquilequia could level up to forty, maybe more. As Alien had suggested, Dallion could use one to restore his legs in seconds, not to mention boost his spell power for up to an hour. At the right moment, that could change the result of a battle, maybe even the entire war.

"The Azures should have gone after you." Dallion resisted the temptation and merely placed them in his own domain.

"They too were a distraction that went out of hand." Alien slid off the Vermillion ring. "Just like you. The deal is done. Now, I can leave."

"Go ahead." Dallion took his ring. "Remember, can't harm me."

"Do I look like someone who could fight Moon candidates?" The archmage let out a bitter laugh. "I'd wish you good luck, but I would be lying." He cast a flight spell, then flew out of the window.

Feeling somewhat generous, Dallion expanded the size of the opening, allowing the man to leave more comfortably.

I must say, I didn't expect that, Adzorg said. I always felt potential coming from him, but was annoyed that he never chose to meet it. Now, I know why.

**AQUILEQUIA has assimilated the MAGIC cluster, increasing her level to 7.**

"Do you think he had them in him back when he was your apprentice?"

*Who knows? It's possible. For all we know, it's possible that he never was a mage to begin with. With enough energy flowing within his realm, he might have been able to borrow the magic trait even without using the Moonstones themselves.*

“Have there been such cases?”

*No, but there haven't been cases like Diroh, either. There's no telling what might happen if something divine is placed within a person's realm.*

Dallion himself was a product of divine magic. He didn't have the magic trait upon awakening. It was only thanks to the phoenix gem that he had become what he was. More than once, it had been mentioned that his magic threads were different from everyone else's due to precisely that. Having to spend his entire life with more and more Moonstones within his realm and be forbidden to use them must have been beyond terrifying.

I know it sounds bad, but it's a logical course of action, Adzorg said. As long as there's enough protection to prevent invasions and foreign echoes, it's the perfect place. No one could peek into the personal realm of others.

Such a mage's thing to say, Dallion thought. The old mage probably didn't even see how wrong it was, merely commenting on efficiency and a swell found exception.

“I'm glad I never awakened a mage,” Dallion muttered.

**AQUILEQUIA has assimilated the MAGIC cluster, increasing her level to 9.**

There are a few valuable items you could take from here, if you want, Adzorg suggested.

“I think I've taken enough.”

The walls of the building detached floor by floor, falling to the ground where they were instantly swallowed up. The roof moved to the side, revealing a clear blue sky before it, too, was gone. In less than a minute, all that was left was Dallion, standing on an empty field.

## **REALM INVASION**

**ARCHDUCHESS PRISCORD has invaded ACADEMY.**

“Here you are,” Dallion said, summoning both his blades. “You're right on time.”

Chapter 940: All the Archduchess' Soldiers

The pain in what was left of Dallion's legs had decreased to a dull ache. It was by no means pleasant, but not enough to distract him from the upcoming fight.

It was obvious that the archduchess was making a show of force. She didn't bother using stealth or concealing the numbers of her army. Without any care whatsoever, she had ventured into the domain atop an awakened animal—a warhorse from what Dallion could make out.

Riding an awakened creature? he said to himself. Her new rank came with its privileges. He had to do his best not to disappoint.

Gleam, how are things on your end? he asked, summoning his Nox dagger.

She eats like a cow, the shardfly replied with mild irritation. Other than that, we seem fine. No one's tried anything so far.

*That'll change soon. Priscord is here. She's come for me.*

I'll be right there—

No! Dallion ordered. Stay with Aquí. Make sure she levels up as much as possible. I'll deal with this.

Without bothering to cast an illusion in place of his missing feet, Dallion floated in the direction of Priscord's army. With many of the buildings removed, the Academy seemed no different than a serene valley. That was just the calm before the storm. Although she hadn't been present during the ceremony at the imperial city, she had probably heard about everything that had happened. The emperor had been careful to keep everything within the capital separate from everything outside. At the time, Dallion thought that was to guard himself. In fact, it was the opposite—the imperial city was nothing more than a target meant to attract everyone's attention, while the emperor was elsewhere and his forces were scattered throughout the empire.

It didn't take long for the countess to become visible in the distance. Wearing a highly expensive dress of diamond thread, she rode side-saddle on the back of a warhorse large enough to be a small building. A handful of domain rulers walked behind, all dressed in light armor of various designs and colors. Their levels were in the high eighties and low nineties—the equivalent of Hannah and Vihrogon. Further behind started a massive army made of fully armored soldiers who had passed the fourth awakening gate. Despite being made entirely of sky silver, the sets of armor were mostly for show. Everyone was aware that such armor would do little against an awakened of Dallion's level.

**The TOWN of ISAL is part of your domain.**

A rectangle flashed in front of Dallion's eyes. Euryale was doing quite well on the other front. Nearly all of Wetie province had been reclaimed with Dallion's forces pushing in further north. It would have been nice if he were able to join in, directing his settlements personally. Sadly, facing the archduchess required all of his attention.

Both sides kept on moving towards one another. Once they got half a mile apart, the archduchess raised her hand, indicating her army to stop. Dallion, on his part, kept on floating forward for a few seconds more before doing the same.

“Lost your legs already?” the woman laughed. She was keeping a low voice, knowing that Dallion had the perception trait to hear her. “For someone claiming to be the emperor's equal, that's more than a bit disappointing.”

“So nice of you to come here personally to tell me that.” Dallion used his music skill to probe the woman's defenses. He wasn't just targeting her, but the horse, and every item guardian on her body.

Two of the domain rulers instantly reacted, taking out harpsiswords of their own. Their chords, although less sophisticated, were adequate enough to interfere with Dallion's music attack. Preventing the music strands from attaching to their targets.

"So predictable." The archduchess pretended to take it calmly, but Dallion could tell that she was tense. Likely, the attack had come closer than she felt comfortable. "What will it be next? Spells?"

"You're in my domain now," Dallion continued with his attack. Even if he had no chance of succeeding, it was keeping two of her nobles occupied. "What did you think would happen?"

"True, you appear to have the advantage. All the skills, all that raw power, and within your domain, no less."

The war horse snorted. Dallion could feel its hostility. There was no way this was a natural creature. The magic threads within it were too many, clustered in an artificial order.

"You should have arrived earlier. That way, the mages would have—"

Before Dallion could finish, one of Priscord's nobles darted forward. The person had changed considerably, but Dallion recognized him from Halburn. Back then, he was a small piece of crap with delusions of grandeur. After the arena fiasco, and the subsequent conquest of the small neighboring country, he had wormed his way into Countess Priscord's court, remaining there as she rose to power. His skills were still crap, though.

The noble drew a sword and thrust it forward. The blade burst into millions of hair-length tendrils, all of which extended straight at Dallion.

Undoubtedly, it was a peculiar weapon. The magic within it was unlike most of the artifacts Dallion had seen. Among the properties was the ability to drain magic at contact. Clearly, the noble expected that to be enough in his fight against a "battle mage."

Long before any of the metal tendrils got near, Dallion burst into instances, spreading out in all directions.

The cluster of tendrils followed. While numerous, their actions were far too slow for the threat to be taken seriously. In over a hundred instances, Dallion used his blades to deflect them well before they could do any serious damage. A bit of magic was drained from his aura sword at the points at which it made contact, but by no means enough to cause any serious disruptions.

You're overconfident, Giaccia said.

Unauthorized duplication: this tale has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

Dallion didn't reply, instead performing a multi attack as his instances pushed towards his opponent. After a series of parries, he followed up with two line attacks, believing that would be enough to slice them up.

While the strength was destructive enough to slice up the ground for miles, all it did was push the tendrils away. Not only were they stronger than he expected, but also incredibly flexible, letting the thread of destruction slide off them on its way forward.



Leaping back, Dallion slashed the air in an attempt to cast a dozen spells, but no magic circles formed. Even the minute disruptions of the magic flow proved enough to render his sword temporarily useless.

Not losing concentration, Dallion loosened his grip, using a finger to cast the spells. This time, everything was as it should be. The magic circles formed, shooting out steel chains that flew straight at the noble.

The speed seemed torturously slow from Dallion's perspective, but his opponent didn't even have the time to blink before the first one had wrapped around his sword hand. Based on experience, Dallion expected him to twist in an attempt to break free. The noble didn't.

Move back! Giaccia warned.

Dallion did so on the second, performing a spiral attack as he did. That failed to snap any of the metal tendrils, but it twisted them in such a way so as to temporarily tangle them in one another, and get them away from him.

More chains wrapped around the noble's body, followed by a series of crunches. In a matter of seconds, the man went into what appeared to be a series of convulsions, then stopped moving altogether. Interestingly enough, his weapon didn't.

Before Dallion could clear the distance, the strands reformed the sword, which then darted back only to be caught by another of Priscord's nobles.

"Bravo," the woman clapped. "I didn't expect this. Seems you've improved more than people give you credit for."

Despite the vast difference in level between the two, Dallion felt a cold chill. In a one-on-one battle, there would be no doubt that he'd end up victorious even without using magic. No, that wasn't the right way to frame it. Right now, he was in a one-on-one against her.

"You're using symbiont echoes," he said, splitting in a new set of instances.

"Why should the Azures be the only one using such tricks?" Priscord's smile widened. "You have to admire the empress. The second empress and your former house used music to get people to do what they wanted. The nymph empress took a far more direct approach, becoming one with her armies. The only mistake she did was limit herself to one target."

"You've been controlling all your nobles," Dallion said in disgust.

"And they said you were the one thinking outside of the box. I'm controlling all my armies." Two more nobles drew their weapons: a whip blade and an origami ax. They, too, were more intricate than Dallion had seen in the past. No doubt they were quite deadly as well. "Why ruin such good bodies with such feeble minds?"

“It’s never a good idea to fully rely on echoes. They tend to get opinions of their own.”

“Yes, I heard that as well. But it all depends on the will of the original. It’s said that otherworlders have difficulties in that, but only because they are trying to control something that isn’t them.”

Dallion didn’t respond, using his magic threads to restore the effectiveness of his aura sword.

“Despite everything, you’re not part of this world. How can anyone, even an echo, trust something that isn’t from here? It’s natural that it would form opinions, even if it knows that through your death it would die as well.”

Is it possible she doesn’t know about the emperor? Dallion asked within his realm.

Why would she? Adzorg replied. She’s an archduchess—someone who by definition is too ambitious for her own good. The emperor didn’t share that detail with anyone, myself included. As far as she’s concerned, the glowing puppet on the throne is the real deal. And, of course, it belongs to this world.

Three nobles charged at Dallion with the other two remaining near Priscord to protect her from any future music attacks. That wasn’t by any means all. The large mass that composed her army also charged forward—thousands of awakened, boosted in skill and level to the point that the emperor’s awakening altars would allow. There was no doubt that over three quarters of them would die, yet that didn’t matter. Like ants in a colony, one person was controlling them, the same person that possibly fancies herself a contender in the game of conquest.

As things stood now, she was fully aware she had no chance against the emperor, but once she took down Dallion, new opportunities might present themselves. It didn’t matter whether she lost her entire army, or even all her cities in this fight. As long as she was victorious, there would be at least one power to protect her until she regained the strength to take them on.

Spikes shot out from the ground, as Dallion resorted to domain ruler powers in his defense. Simultaneously, he made a series of line and spiral attacks indiscriminately at the approaching forces.

**ATTACK NEGATED**

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

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

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

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

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

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

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

**Attack has no effect.**

**ATTACK NEGATED**

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

**Attack has no effect.**

Rectangles blinked in front of his eyes. Despite her terrible personality, the archduchess hadn't risen to her level by accident. She had been taught how to manipulate, control, and be ready for everyone aiming for her spot. While Dallion hadn't seen her lead armies personally, it was undeniable that she had emerged victorious against Archduke Lanitol, and held her own against the Azures up till now.

Still, she was just one person and, as she had said, part of this world.

Music spark attack, Dallion thought as he slashed the air with his harpsisword