

## Leveling up 961

### Chapter 961: It Sticks to You

Dallion kept on looking through the window at the night sky. Half a Moon was there, barely shining through a thin layer of clouds. It also seemed foreign, like everything else around him.

“Blood pressure’s perfect,” the nurse said.

Despite Dallion’s insistence, the freckled guy—who claimed to be his roommate—had dragged him to the college’s health center for a check-up.

On the way there, Dallion had attempted to combat split, talk to a few trees, even a car, and even enter his personal awakening realm. In all cases, nothing had happened, as if his powers had been sealed.

“You sure you didn’t do something that you weren’t supposed to be doing?” The woman gave him a reproachful look. “First day and all.”

“I just fell down off a table.” Dallion didn’t even have the will to argue.

“Well, you do have a few bruises, but nothing serious. Best you could do is get some sleep and avoid...” she paused. “Falling off any more tables. Now, get out of here.”

“That’s it?” For some reason the exam felt underwhelming.

“I could write this up, but then both of us will have things to answer to. Mostly you. It’s nothing the faculty hasn’t seen before, but they’ll have to get in touch with your parents and... well, you know the rest.”

Dallion didn’t, though on reflection, maybe it was a better idea not to get his parents involved yet. At least not until he figured out what had happened.

“Thanks.” He smiled instinctively, attempting to use his music skills. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“You got that right.” The nurse chuckled. While it was unlikely that music skills were the result of this, he must have done something right. “In future I hope the only time I see you is for a hangover after finals.”

“I’ll do my best.” Dallion stood up and slowly made his way towards the door.

For some reason, the state of the office irked him. There were signs that it was well kept, yet even so, he could see patches of filth all over it: dust that hadn’t been cleaned, cracks left in plain sight, chipped paint and furniture...

Fighting the urge to make a comment, Dallion opened the door.

There was a faint snap – and the handle remained in his hand. The first half second, he wasn’t able to register what had happened. Handles breaking felt like a completely novel experience—something that was never supposed to happen. And yet, there it was—part of the door had broken off and was now in his hand.

“It broke?” Dallion managed to say, still staring at it.

“Not again.” The nurse stood up with the expression of someone who was used to it happening a lot, but annoyed nonetheless. “With all the money pouring in, you’d expect they’d at least be able to replace door handles every now and again. Let me see that.”

“I think they’ll have to this time.” Dallion looked at the handle in his hand. A piece had broken off near the end, making it beyond repair. Thankfully, it had occurred in the course of him opening the door. “Do I need to pay—”

“Wow. And they say the current generation takes no responsibility.” The woman took the handle from Dallion, carefully examined it, possibly in the hopes that he was exaggerating, then sighed. “Well, maybe it’s a good thing. Go on and leave the door open. The night’s not over yet.”

Feeling awkward about the whole thing, Dallion nodded, then went down the corridor to where his roommate was waiting. Judging by his bloodshot eyes, the freckled one was in worse condition than he was. Suppressing a yawn, he stretched, then reluctantly stood up as Dallion approached.

“All good?” he asked, cracking his neck for some reason.

“All good. I’ll live.”

“Not if you’re late for class tomorrow. Let’s go.”

The dorm room was more or less like he remembered it—small, plain, containing the bare minimum of comfort. Even less well kept than the health center, it had two beds, two desks complete with office chairs that had seen better days, and a single window.

What immediately attracted Dallion’s attention, however, was the laptop on his roommate’s desk. Based on the multiple scars and fading stickers, it was hardly new or expensive, but its presence alone was as fascinating as a Moonstone. It had been so long since Dallion had used one. He still remembered the fascination it held, playing games, watching videos, browsing anything he could think of online. After his recent experience, it felt so fake and artificial.

“I’m done.” The freckled one collapsed onto his bed, then kicked off his shoes one by one. Several seconds later, he took his phone out of his pocket and set an alarm.

“I’ll get a shower,” Dallion went into the backroom and quickly closed the door.

“Just keep it down,” the other said.

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Dallion wasn’t listening. Facing the wall, he tried once again to draw an illusion spell to make the room larger. His finger slid along the tiles, but same as before, there was no reaction.

Did I imagine it all? He wondered.

That couldn't be right. There was no way he could imagine a whole world in such detail. It wasn't just a few years he had dreamt up, but close to a decade—whole millennia, if he considered the time within the realms. And yet, he didn't have any proof. His awakened abilities seemed to have gone, as had the skills he'd developed. Looking at his body, he had also lost quite a bit of muscle tone.

"Is this another trial?" he asked. "Did you lock me in a prison item?"

Only the faint buzzing of the lights answered.

The night provided no answers, either. There were no Moon-filled dreams, nothing that made any sense. On a few occasions Dallion would wake up thinking he heard Euryale's voice calling for him, only to wake up and find himself in the same unfamiliar dorm bed. It didn't help that the sheets felt like they were made of recycled plastic.

The following day, the confusion continued. While it couldn't be said that most people were eager for the start of classes, they were at least interested in the environment, if not the teachers. Dallion continued out of it completely. To make things worse, the starting lectures were tediously based on things everyone already knew, making it difficult to focus on anything.

All this continued till noon, when he could no longer use any excuses not to be communicative with the rest of his cohort.

"Let me guess." A short girl with long dark-blond hair went up to him. "You're from some village in the middle of nowhere."

Dallion's heart skipped a beat. Had someone just referred to Dherma?"

"Kansas or Nebraska?" the girl asked.

The faint ray of hope completely shattered. Even so, he forced a laugh that sounded quite natural.

"Both." He made an effort to blend in. "How did you guess?"

"Other than being overwhelmed, unable to hold a conversation, and the only one without a laptop?" Despite her tone, the girl was smiling. "Your shoes."

"My shoes?" Dallion looked down, only to hear a giggle.

"Sorry, sorry." The girl tried to contain her laughter, with little success. "I didn't think you'd actually look."

"No worries." Dallion pretended to join in the cheer. "I forgot my laptop in my dorm, so for a moment I thought I might have forgotten my shoes as well."

The explanation only made the girl laugh harder.

"I'm Dal, by the way."

"Jenna," she introduced herself. "A few of us are thinking of chipping in for a few large pizzas before class. Want to join?"

“Sure. Let me just check the when’s—” He reached into his pocket to grab his phone. As he did, the device caught on a loose thread, then slipped out of his hand onto the stone pavement.

“Ouch!” Jenna stared.

“It’s fine.” Dallion picked up the phone. When he turned it around, a large crack across the screen let him know that he was only fifty percent right.

“I’ve only seen that happen on videos.” The girl moved closer. “Is it still working?”

“Looks like.” From what he could see, it was only the layer of glass that had suffered.

“That’s really unlucky.”

“I must have treated the phone really poorly for this to happen,” Dallion said, musing.

“What do you mean?”

“Objects. It’s said that the worse you treat them, the more vengeful they become. And when they’ve really had enough, they slip out of your hands and roll into places you can never find them.”

“You know, that’s actually deep. It would explain why my dad can never find the remote.”

“You better tell him next time you talk.” Carefully Dallion put his phone away. “Anyway, you mentioned food?”

The group Jenna had mentioned turned out to be the average combination of people: most of them seemingly interesting with a few that it was clear that no one would get along with in a few months. Dallion’s roommate had also taken the opportunity to tag along. He fell into the neutral category, trying to be funny all the time, though not annoying enough so people would openly start ignoring him.

The conversation started as expected: small talk about food, quickly shifting to thoughts on college courses, and a smattering of talk about home. There was a moment in which Dallion was worried that he might be asked to tell stuff about his home, but enough of the others were reluctant to talk on the topic either. From there, it switched to jokes and random events until it reached the next common denominator: parties.

“Dal’s definitely a wild one,” his roommate bragged. “Spent the whole of last night dancing on a table till it broke.”

“That was you?” Jenna asked.

“Really? I heard the guy that fell was taken to the ER,” another girl in the group said.

“No ER. I bonked my head and got knocked out for a few seconds,” Dallion downplayed the incident. “Eric carried me to the health center.”

All eyes focused on his roommate.

“Well, what can I say?” The freckled shrugged. “I’m a nice guy.” He attempted the worst Goodfellows impersonation.

“The nurse kicked me out and said not to bother her until after finals,” Dallion continued, getting another round of laughter. “I promised I’d try.”

Another round of laughter ensued. Possibly for that reason, one of the staff in the pizza place increased the volume of the music. Having a stream of college students was generally profitable for business, though only if they ordered a lot and finished eating quickly. The music came from spotify—possibly someone’s personal membership.

The genre of music could only be described as one of those soft vocal trance compilations with more vocals than beat. People would describe it as one of those things that was one level up from elevator music.

When the current song came to an end and the new one began, Dallion froze. For over two seconds, he remained completely still, concentrating on the lyrics, then rushed out of his chair to the person at the counter.

“What’s that song?” he asked.

“Chill, kid.” A man in his thirties frowned. “I’ll down the volume.”

“What’s the name of the song?” Dallion took out his phone and opened it to cashless payment. “And the artist.”

“Hey, no need for that.” The man looked at his own phone. “Summer Vines,” he said. “Summer Vines by Red Atol.”

Neither the song nor the artist meant anything to Dallion. What did, though, was the subtle strands of music mixed within her words. There could be no mistaking it—it was similar to what Dallion had used many times to nudge people in the direction he wanted.

“Catchy, isn’t it?” The man at the counter smiled. “One of those no-hit-wonders that sticks to you.”

“Yeah,” Dallion whispered. “It sticks to you...”

Chapter 962: One with Music Skills

Considering the supposed sea of information available about anything, it was absurd how difficult it was to get. One would assume that knowing the song and artist's name would instantly provide some info on the matter. As Dallion found out after a few days, that was far from the case. His roommate had agreed, after some convincing, to help out using his own “connections” to find more,

but that too was said to be slow and by no means guaranteed. In the meantime, all that Dallion could do was try to continue with college life. Sadly, that wasn't as easy as it sounded. Three things constantly occupied his mind: the artist using music skills, the awakened world, and Euryale.

"Am I boring you?" the professor interrupted his lecture to ask.

Dallion glanced at the man, then at the formulas on the whiteboard behind him. He had no idea what he had been thinking when he had chosen to minor in mathematics. Then again, the introduction to calculus was so rudimentary that he felt as if he were still in high-school.

"Sorry, I just know all this already," Dallion said with a smile.

"So, I am boring you." The sudden smile on the professor made it clear that the man wasn't in the least upset. "There's nothing fancy about the fundamentals, but they are fundamental. Don't worry, in a few weeks, you'll remember this day and miss it."

If that was intended to be a joke, it was particularly bad. Still, polite laughter filled the room. There was only one chance to create a first impression and most of Dallion's cohort didn't want to make the same one he had.

The lecture continued without other altercations. At the end, Dallion and his group once again went to their usual place for pizza. The staff was different and so was the music. That didn't prevent Dallion from browsing on his phone again.

"You're really good at that stuff," Jenna said.

"What?" Dallion looked up.

"Calculus. You know a lot without even trying."

"It's not that difficult." Dal's roommate joined in. "Most of it's old stuff."

"Yeah." Dallion put his phone away. If only he was as good at finding things online as he was in class.

"You're still using that thing?" another member of the group asked. "Change the screen or get a new one."

It still works, Dallion thought. He had forgotten how easily objects were discarded back on Earth. He himself had constantly done it in the past. It seemed like the proper way to go at the time, though not now.

"Any new news?" he turned to his roommate.

"Dude, you keep asking me every five minutes!"

That wasn't exactly true. There was no need to ask that often. Dallion could tell by how the other behaved whether he'd done anything on the matter or not. The questions had rather served as reminders for the guy to actually do something.

"A friend found some old patreon."

The response came as a complete surprise. When Dallion had asked the question, it was in the hopes that the guy would shut up. Apparently, miracles were possible... although it had been over a week so far.

“The name’s different, but he swears it’s the same person,” the roommate continued. “The place is barely active, but it’s still there.”

“What’s the name?” Jenna took her own phone out. At times Dallion felt she had the curiosity of a ferret combined with the cunning of a cat. If she ever became a bit more cynical, she’d be like Aquilequia.

“It’s...” The guy took out his phone and stared. “It’s this.” He placed the device on the table so that everyone could see.

Elatia Gills, Dallion read. It remained unclear whether that was the artist’s real name, but it definitely didn’t contain any links to the awakened world. Based on the uncertainty written all over his roommate’s face, it wasn’t even certain that she was linked to the songs he’d heard. Still, it was better than nothing, so he decided it was worth a fiver to join the patreon and send her a message. As he attempted to do so, the glass covering his screen cracked some more.

“Ouch.” His roommate cringed at the sound. “Just tell your folks to buy you a new phone, dude. It’s painful watching this crumble in your hands.”

“Maybe I will,” Dallion muttered as he quickly typed in his message.

*Hi!*

*Loved Summer Vines!*

*Am I wrong, or was Astreza one of your songs as well?*

By no means the height of literary mastery, but it was short and to the point. If she had any connection to the awakened world, she’d get the reference. If not, Dall would simply come off as a wannabe fan who had mixed up online songs.

Barely had he done so when the screen of his phone flickered off completely. For several seconds, he stared at it, unable to believe what had happened. Then he tried to turn the phone off and on again. There was no denying it was rather old—ancient by modern standards—but he remained attached to it.

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“Told you!” his roommate said, almost with glee.

“Did you have anything important there?” Jenna asked, out of concern. “I once lost my phone and needed months to reconnect to all the places I’ve been to.”

“It’s fine,” Dallion lied. “Just a few photos. Everything else is pretty standard.”

“What kind of photos?” The roommate asked, getting the expected response of laughter and mock indignation from everyone.

“I can give you mine if you want to check stuff,” Jenna offered.

It wasn’t something that Dallion particularly did, but given the offer, it would be worse for him to refuse. So far, he and Jenna were nothing more than friends, but there were indications she wanted for things to develop into something more. He could feel that she was hesitant about it. In other circumstances, he would have gladly gone along with it. According to his father, that was one of the roles of college, after getting a decent education, of course. Yet, in his mind, Dallion remained married.

“Thanks.” He took out his sim card. There was a fine line between leading someone and just being friendly. After a few months in the Tamin capital, he had learned to thread the needle rather well.

Jenna’s phone was the same brand as his, just a much newer model. The moment he typed in the pin, several notifications popped up, indicating half a dozen missed calls.

That was strange. Dallion hadn’t received any since the party. The last one, from what he could see, had been less than an hour ago. More alarming, he recognized the number.

“Sorry,” he stood up. “Must make a call. I’ll be quick.”

He made his way outside and auto-dialed the number. The phone rang twice, after which it was quickly picked up.

“Dal?” a female voice said.

“Hi, Mom,” Dallion replied. Hearing her voice felt strange, like watching a movie about something that had happened ages ago.

“Are you alright? I’ve been trying—”

“My phone broke, Mom,” Dallion quickly interrupted. “A friend gave me hers so I can call you.”

“Oh.” There was a long pause, containing several questions. The detail Dallion had provided, though, proved enough to alleviate the woman’s immediate concern and replace it with another. “You’re being careful, right?” she asked.

“Yes, Mom. I’m being careful. How are you guys?”

There was another pause.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

Damn it! He had forgotten he didn’t behave this way before his awakening.

“If there’s anything you need, just—”

“It’s just a completely new experience. I miss home a bit.”



“My little Dal.” One could swear hearing the sound of a tear form in the woman’s eye. “It’ll pass soon. Of course, you’d feel a bit homesick. It’s a big responsibility, but it’s also a good thing, though. And, yes, your father and I are always here to support you should you need it.”

“I know. So, how is he?”

“Your father? Working as usual. He promised he’ll try to take it slow now that you’re there, but you know him.”

“Yeah, I know him.” The truth was, Dallion barely had any idea. “Sorry, mom, but is there anything you needed from me? Class is starting soon.”

“No, no. Just wanted to make sure you’re alright. I know you don’t want to have your parents call you all the time. Do well in class.”

“I will.”

“And also, be careful. You know what I mean.”

“Bye, Mom.”

Dallion ended the call. At least in that aspect, nothing seemed to have changed. Weird that he hadn’t gotten the messages, though. Maybe his roommate was right, and it was time to buy a new phone. Nowadays, living without a phone was virtually impossible. Good thing he still had his laptop.

Going through his messages and calls to make sure there wasn’t anything else he missed, Dallion returned to his friends.

“Thanks.” He took out the sim card and gave the phone back to Jenna. “Had to call my parents.”

“What happened?” she asked. Everyone also stopped talking, focusing their interest on him.

“Nothing. She’s been calling for a while and my phone bounced the calls for some reason.”

There were a few comments on the topic, after which the conversation moved on to the trivialities of the day. While Dallion actively participated, his mind remained elsewhere. Talking to his mother made him think of his awakened world family. At this point—provided they still existed—they probably had no memory of him. Their entire world had changed, acquiring a new history and appearance... unless it never existed in the first place. That was precisely the reason he so much wanted to get in touch with “Red Atol” and the person behind the name. At least that way he might have confirmation that his entire awakened life wasn’t something he had dreamed up.

All the afternoon lectures were just as boring as the ones before noon. Some of the professors were better than others, but all of them were rehashing things that were commonly known to the point that Dallion considered just leaving. The only reason he made it to evening was because he spent

the major part of the lectures on his laptop—most of the time refreshing his mail in the hopes he'd get an answer. The odds were against it, of course. Even if the patreon was active and its owner got the mail, she'd hardly drop everything just to respond to a random fan, who might well turn out to be completely mistaken.

Nonetheless, Dallion kept on with his searches of terms that only people from the other world would know. Unfortunately, as he had found out after his first day "back", the endlessness of the internet contained a lot of letter combinations that were identical to many of the terms. Each of the seven Moons existed in some form or another as products, companies, or users in a variety of platforms. Most of the country and city names fared no differently.

Finding anything related seemed hopeless when Dallion got an email. Looking at the address, it was a response to his message containing nothing more than three words: Who are you?

Anyone's immediate reaction would be joy. Dallion, however, had had his hopes dashed a few times already, so he approached it with curious optimism.

A friend of the Seven Moons. He went into his patreon profile and responded.

The reply didn't delay.

*The Seven Moons have no friends.*

Now, there could be little doubt that she had gone through the same experience.

*How did you find me?*

If Dallion could have split into instances, he would have just to look around. Since that wasn't an option, he discretely did it the old-fashioned way.

*I heard your songs. You're using music skills.*

There was no immediate reply. Had he scared the person off? That would be the normal reaction. Maybe he should have been more subtle about it. Not that it mattered. As long as he had his confirmation, it was a matter of time before he tracked her down or found someone else.

A new message arrived, containing a map location. It was two states away—a bit far to reach at such a short notice and with the money he currently had.

Calmly, Dallion created a map link of his university and sent it as a reply. He considered whether to send a picture of himself, but decided against it. This wasn't the awakened world, and information couldn't be erased out of existence.

Another message arrived.

*Keep listening to my spotify. I'll come to you.*

Chapter 963: The Girl in the Muscle Car

In the awakening world, any moment could be stretched to infinity. Right now, Dallion was back to the time when a day was a day, but even so, knowing that he was to meet someone else who'd been outside of this world felt painfully long. Forgetting to order a new phone, he had spent the rest of the night listening to Red Atol on spotify. All in all, there were three dozen songs, all of them singles. The lyrics weren't anything special, focusing on the generic themes of love, loneliness, self-

discovery, and space. They couldn't be called bad by any stretch of the imagination, but that wasn't what made them likable. The music threads added to them had minute elements of joy and melancholy, making people want to listen to them. If the woman had chosen a more popular genre, she could well have turned into a star. More than likely, the decision had been deliberate.

Song by song, the hours dripped by. With nothing left to do, Dallion started counting them. Upon reaching a hundred and one, the first rays of dawn peeked through his dorm window.

"You still up?" His roommate stirred on the other bed.

"Of course not," Dallion said with complete conviction. "I just got up half an hour ago."

The explanation made enough sense to be plausible, causing the guy to turn to the other side. After ten more minutes, he turned again and stretched.

"Listen, can you cover for me today?" Dallion asked.

"Dude! Give it a few weeks at least."

"It's not like I'm learning anything during the snorefest. Maybe the profs and TAs will notice and start doing better."

"You're crazy." The freckled grinned. "Sure, I'll think of something. Where will you be, though?"

"Here mostly," Dallion lied. "I need to order a new phone and check on a few things. I might replace this too," he tapped the side of his laptop.

"That must have been some call. By the way, if you're loaded, maybe get a spare which I can borrow?"

It would have been easy to promise anything. However, Dallion decided to take the vague approach.

"Sure." He glanced at the other. "Maybe in a few months."

"You shithead." The roommate laughed. "You'll owe me one."

Close to fifteen minutes later, Dallion was alone in the room. It was outright impressive how ineffective and forgetful his roommate was. Good thing all the classes so far were easy, or he'd never have been able to get through a single lecture.

Almost an hour later, Atol's new song appeared. The name of the single was *Within the Seventh Sphere*—potentially something connected with the seven Moons, though by no means definite. Immediately, Dallion started listening.

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

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

Growing up, it couldn't be said that Dallion was particularly bad at singing, but he definitely wasn't anything special. His stay in the awakened world had changed that. Clearly, not all skills were lost after being cast out.

A notification emerged on the laptop screen—Dallion had received a new patreon message. The message was a map location, but this one was a lot closer. In fact, it was the dormitory building Dallion was at right now.

*In front. Red dress.*

“Shit!” Dallion jumped to the window.

Climbing on his desk, he opened the window and looked outside. There were a few people about, but none of them matched the description given.

Dallion grabbed his laptop, then hastily put on some shoes and rushed into the corridor and down the stairs. Out of habit, he tried to combat split again, but only one instance of him kept on running. Fortunately, with most of the people off to class, there was no one to bump into.

Getting in front of the dormitory, he once again looked about. There was no one in a red dress anywhere. For that matter, he couldn't see anyone wearing anything red.

Suspecting this to be a test, Dallion opened his laptop again. Before he could check for messages, a honk came from the student parking-lot. There wasn't a single red car there either, but it was difficult to miss the black and yellow muscle car that clearly didn't belong there.

Seriously? Dallion remained still.

A second set of honking suggested that he wasn't wrong. At this point, there were two ways for him to react: keep his distance or go straight at it. After engaging with seven deities in battle, Dallion went for the second option.

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The passenger seat door opened as he approached. Without pause, he got in and closed it behind him. A petite woman in a biker outfit. She was probably a few years older than him, with Asian features, and long black hair that went red further down. An unmistakable air of rebellion surrounded her, suggesting that she was part of a biker gang. Yet, that was a false impression. There wasn't a single tattoo or piercing on her as far as could be seen.

“Red Atol?” Dallion asked.

She nodded.

“Red Moon, red card—muscle car,” Dallion said.

“Just a car I got.” She tried using music again, but Dallion snapped his fingers, causing the strands to snap. Part of him was disappointed it had been so easy, but apparently Earth brought a lot of limitations to awakening powers.

“How did you find me?” Dal asked.

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

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

The woman raised a finger.

“Let’s go somewhere first.”

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

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

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

“Yep. Part of the Tamin Empire.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

That was a minor disappointment. Given that the music skill had been passed down on the mother’s side of Dallion’s family, he had hoped that they might end up being related there.

“When did you return?” she continued.

“A few weeks ago. You?”

“A bit longer.” She looked at the road straight ahead. “Mage or domain ruler?”

“A bit of both.” It was weird talking about such things in the open.

Subconsciously, Dallion expected a yellow rectangle to emerge warning him not to discuss matters that others hadn’t learned yet. “You?”

“I used to be a fucking noble,” she laughed, but the sadness was apparent.

Dallion remained quiet. Saying he was the Architect was a bad move regardless of circumstances.

“Are there others?” he asked after a while.

“Lots. Good luck finding them. You have the whole of human history to go through. The ones that are here keep to themselves. I thought I tracked someone down once. He’d left any spot I found until I finally gave up.”

“Why?”

“Look at me.” The woman’s expression sharpened. “I used to own four cities bigger than New York, and I don’t even remember how many smaller ones. Do you think I like being reminded of what I had and could never have again?”

Dallion could see the point. But at the same time, he also saw the flaw in logic.

“Why not try to go back?”

“You think you can go back?” She laughed again. “You must really be green. If the Moons wanted us back, we’d be there. Being stuck here is their way of saying that we’re done. It’s up to new players now.”

“I’ll find a way to go back.” Determination emanated from Dallion. For a single moment, he almost felt as if he were in control of his music skills as he was back in the awakened world. The feeling didn’t last long, quickly fading away. “I’ve no choice.”

“What were you? Some bigshot somewhere?”

“I was married.”

It wasn’t so much what Dallion said, but the way he said it. With Atol’s current level of music skills, she was able to feel Dallion’s focus.

“Holy shit. You really plan on trying, don’t you?”

“You said all the awakened on Earth are keeping to their business,” Dallion began. “Why didn’t you? You didn’t have to reply. You definitely didn’t need to fly here on the redeye.”

“I hitched a ride on a private jet,” she said unapologetically. “As I said, I can be convincing.”

“You still haven’t answered my question, though.”

In the awakened world, Dallion would have been able to read her emotions without even trying. Here, he had to rely on observation as well: the micro expressions on her face, the subtle changes of her voice and mannerisms, even the frequency of her blinking. All told him that she wanted to be here, that she was relieved she had found him.

“I wanted to be sure there was someone else,” she admitted. “I told you that I wasn’t able to find anyone from there. I lied. I found half a dozen before I stopped searching. All of them remembered parts of the place, but for all of them, it was like a dream. They had no real memories and or powers, just echoes of an existence. Only mages and nobles keep those. If there’s anyone else that has, I haven’t been able to find them.”

“Well, now there’s two of us.”

On the negative side, that still didn’t help Dallion much. He had found his confirmation, but nothing more. Yet, it was precisely that single spark of hope that made him decide to continue down the path he was afraid to voice even to himself.

“Are you serious about going back?” the woman asked.

“I told you.”

“You uttered a few words. If you’re serious about it, prove it. Leave your college and forget everyone in your current life: friends, family, exes, the works. Agree to that and we’ll go to the airport right now. Don’t and I’ll leave you here for wasting my time.”

This escalated quickly, didn’t it, Adzorg? Dallion asked, as if the mage could still hear him.

There was a time when he would have found the choice impossible. To some extent, he was happy to have returned to his old life. Reconnecting with his mother, the new friends he’d met at college were part of a distant past he’d lost ages ago. All that paled in comparison to what he had lost—not the power, not the awakened abilities, but Euryale. Hardly an hour would pass without Dallion having memories about her. No matter what he was doing, the gorgon’s voice remained always there, present in the back of his mind.

“Not so easy, is it?” Atol put her hands on the wheel.

“Head for the airport,” Dallion said, causing her eyes to widen.

“Are you sure? You’ve already lost one life. Are you ready to throw away another trying to find it?”

“Yes.”

She kept on looking at him, as if expecting the punchline of a joke.

“You’re nuts,” she grinned, then turned the car around. “I’ll help you, but you’re not leaving your college. I’d hate myself if I made you mess that up. I’ll convince every admin asshole to let you when we have something. Meanwhile, you’ll remain enrolled.”

“What about your place?”

“My parent’s place is in Hawaii. I’ve been staying at “friends” the last few years doing this or that. The song thing was on a whim. I thought I’d become an instant celebrity. Wasn’t worth it.”

Dallion was about to ask where she’d stay, but the answer was obvious: she was very good at convincing and colleges always needed TAs.

Chapter 964: An Unexpected Mate

There were no questions why Dallion had uncharacteristically skipped an entire day of college. There were even less questions concerning the unusual teaching assistant that had appeared the very next day. She appeared charming, well versed, and for some reason strangely familiar to everyone.

It further came as no surprise that she and Dallion were distant relatives, even if they didn't look anything alike. Everyone accepted it and even, for no apparent reason, invited her to join the group for lunch. It was also completely natural that she'd often pass by to see Dallion in his dorm room. Apparently, no rules or terms of conduct had been broken, both staff and students were all right with it, and even Dallion's roommate had accepted her as part of the family—which was marginally strange, since he was certain he definitely wasn't related to her.

"Really, how did you score such a job?" the roommate asked. "Three days per week talking about things you already know. Dude, I must get me one of those."

"It's easy," Atol replied without even looking at him. Officially, her name was said to be Georgia Chu—a name that Dallion found completely made up—but for some reason, she continued using her online alias. "All you need to do is become a top-tenner in your field by the age of twenty-five."

"Duude. Twenty-five."

Dallion could almost hear his roommate running the numbers in his mind to determine whether he had enough time to make it possible.

"I think you should research that, Max," the woman suggested. "Even if it's not what you end up doing, it's always better to be informed."

The music threads were more than visible for any awakened with the skill to see them. In the awakened world, the attempt would have been called extremely sloppy. Here, it was perfectly adequate.

"Right." The boy nodded, then rushed out of the room as if he were making the most important decision of his life.

"You didn't have to go so far," Dallion said.

"It'll be fine. He'll forget it in a few weeks. And if it's not, maybe it's a good thing."

The woman seemed scarily accustomed to this. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that it had become her way of life.

"How did you keep your skill?" Dallion asked. He had been trying to regain his for days with no success.

"Simple." She looked right into his eyes. "I got struck by lightning."

Nothing in the way she said it indicated that she was lying. There was no hesitation, no music strands to attempt to influence him one way or another. Even her expression was dead serious.

"I'm messing with you." Atol smirked after checking his reaction. "I've no idea how it happened. I just kept on trying until one day it worked."



The explanation was vague. Also, Dallion couldn't tell whether it was a lie.

"Start singing to yourself. No one will notice and who knows, maybe you'll get lucky."

"Brute force it." Dallion considered the option. Regaining part of his music skills would make things a lot easier, but that wasn't the main focus. Right now, he needed more information, and for that, they needed to find others who remembered. "The guy you were tracking. Did you find out anything more?"

"Not a thing. I convinced a few P.I.'s, even got the F.B.I. to look into it. He's a ghost. Whatever skills he has, they let him stay one step ahead."

With all the cameras around, that was an impressive feat. The awakened definitely wasn't using music. There was a chance that he knew spellcraft, but Dallion feared something more sinister: prophetic visions. Combat splitting was only good for the moment. From what Atol had said, the awakened was much better at strategic thinking. Scholar skills were one option. Either that or a trait ability.

"Do you see them appear? The rectangles?"

"Only on tech screens. You'll get used to it after a while. It's a whole different story now. Nothing warns you that you're getting mugged, nothing tells you how you're doing, and you don't get prizes for succeeding. Just your average common life."

Even after all this time, there was still some bitterness left within her. Possibly that was why she had taken a chance on Dallion—the one in a million chance that he'd find a way to restore their powers. That told him two things: there was a way for it to happen, and she didn't know it. It was pointless to ask her to retrace her steps. She had probably done that hundreds of times and still hadn't been able to reclaim any of her other skills. There always was the chance that she was lying, but she didn't give the impression of someone who'd be shy about abusing her advantages.

"Tell me what you know," he said.

"There's nothing you can try that I haven't."

"Come on."

With a shrug, the woman took out her phone and tapped something into it.

"Check your mail."

When Dallion did so, he found a series of map locations. Inputting it on the map revealed a large cluster of dots in a specific area. The area was by no means small, stretching along half a state, but still a lot smaller than Dallion expected.

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“He’s stayed in one state?”

“That’s the shitty part. If he had moved about, I’d have given up on the second try.”

“How are you sure he’s still there?”

“I’m not. Every few months, he’d mess up and leave a trail. At first, I thought he wanted to draw me in, but no. Shitter just ups and vanishes, then emerges elsewhere.”

“And he never goes to the same place twice...”

“I thought about that, but no. Too much effort. I’d have to get an army there, and there’s no telling how he’ll retaliate.” There was a moment of silence. “I would if someone did that to me.”

Dallion looked at the map again. There were too many things that didn’t make sense. If the awakened was that good, why was he letting himself be found? If he wasn’t, how was he evading capture? There had to be more to this.

“How did you find him the first time?”

“Scratch cards. He won enough times to have it mentioned in a few places. It was pure luck. I was grasping at straws at the time, so I went to check it. After I got there, he was gone.”

“Rented house?”

“Condo. He was renting.”

“He left all his stuff behind?”

“Most of it, yeah. Why’s it important?”

Dallion closed his laptop.

“You awakened early, didn’t you?”

“Not that much.” Atol crossed her arms. The corners of her eyes and mouth shifted slightly, indicating she was both curious and annoyed.

“Late bloomers go wild when they first awaken. They’ve established their view of the world, so when they gain a skill boost they immediately try it out without thinking of the consequences.”

“Shithead.” The woman smiled. The satisfaction of knowing that Dallion wasn’t better than her beat her desire to find a new trail. “If he was a late bloomer there, doesn’t mean he’s one here. He’ll still remember everything that—”

“He can’t remember what never happened,” Dallion interrupted. “You’ve been tracking a natural. The reason why you never caught him was because someone was there to clean up his messes—someone with the knowledge and experience to do so.”

There was nothing else to add. For eight seconds, Atol looked at Dallion, not saying a word. Then returned her phone to her jacket pocket.

“I’ll set things up with the admins.” The woman went to the door. “Wrap up anything you need, then wait by the car. We’re off to the airport in half an hour.”

It took over an hour for Atol to convince everyone relevant to let both of them off for a few weeks. The levels of bureaucracy were such that even music skills had a difficult time cutting through. Meanwhile, Dallion spent the time whistling to himself and thinking. Right now, he had two good leads which he had to resolve in order to achieve his true goal. Preferably, learning how Atol learned her skills came first. The second was to determine what skills their target had. There was a strong chance that once cornered, he wouldn’t allow himself to be convinced to join them that easily.

“Dal?” someone yelled, breaking his train of thought.

Instinctively, Dallion turned around, breaking the strap of his backpack in the process. No longer supported, the backpack fell to the ground, threatening to damage his computer as it hit the ground.

Dallion didn’t think. In that moment, he could see the whole thing occurring as if in slow motion in front of his very eyes. Although his laptop was old, he didn’t want it to break as well, so he did the only thing that would prevent that—grab the backpack before it hit the ground.

“Are you okay?” Jenna came rushing to him. “That looked... like wow.”

“Yeah.” Dallion’s mind still hadn’t caught up to what had occurred. His reaction was a lot faster than it should have been. “It’s just an old backpack.”

“You’ll need to buy a few more things,” she said with a tense chuckle. “I heard that you’re heading off for a family matter. Is everything okay?”

What the heck excuse did Atol use?! “Oh, it’s mostly fine. Don’t worry about it.” He pretended to check the contents of his backpack, as if making sure that everything was alright inside. “I’ll be back in a week or two. You won’t know I’m gone.”

“That’ll be difficult.”

Oh, damn, Dallion thought.

“Just take care, okay? Family’s important and all, but...” her words trailed off as she approached closer. “Just take care.”

Dallion knew exactly what she wanted to follow, yet he couldn't do it. The notion made him think about Eury and that made his heart tighten and his resolve double.

"I'll be fine." He could offer a hug as a compromise, but in his mind, that would be too leading. "I just need some time," he resorted to the cliché. It would have been better if he had learned how to use music skills, sadly that remained still far away.

"I know." The smile remained on Jenna's face, but it was clear by her expression that she was disappointed. "You always pull through. Well—" she took a step back "—I better return to class. See you when you get back."

Dallion watched her head back to the main building. On the way, she crossed paths with Atol. Neither of the two said a word, continuing to their destinations as if they were complete strangers.

Once Atol reached Dallion, she turned around, glancing at Jenna in the distance.

"You're not that dumb, right?" she asked.

"We have work to do."

"You were someone important there, weren't you? Count? Prince? Bishop?"

"Something like that." Dallion turned towards the car. "Let's go."

"Now you made me curious." A smirk formed on the woman's face. "What exactly were you?"

"We can discuss this on the road."

"Why not now? Flight's six hours away." Despite being overconfident to this point, the woman hadn't lost her sense of self-preservation. "It's a simple question," she pressed on, using her music skills to sway Dallion into answering. The attempt was multi-layered and quite well executed, yet Dallion could still see through it.

"Don't," he ordered, hoping that his music skills would trigger. They didn't, but the warning was enough for Atol to back off. After all, her attempt had failed as well.

"Suit yourself." The woman shrugged. "You'll have trouble with that one. I can help you when we get back."

Instead of an answer, Dallion got into the car and slammed the door behind him. The strength was a bit too much, creating a sound that undoubtedly wasn't supposed to be produced.

Sorry, he thought out of habit.

No worries, mate, the car replied. I'm used to it.

Dallion didn't budge a muscle. No one on Earth—himself included—was supposed to be able to converse with guardians, and yet he just had.

## Chapter 965: Sphere Realms

You're a guardian, Dallion thought as Atol began the long drive to the airport.

Sure am, mate, the car replied. And you're a talker. Tried chatting up the girl a few times, but she can't hear a thing.

That explained one thing.

What race? Dallion asked.

What do you mean, mate? The car guardian sounded confused. I'm a car, but that's not exactly a race.

*When I enter your realm, what will you look like?*

*Enter my realm? You can't do that, mate. Only divine—*

### **SPHERE AREA AWAKENING**

Dallion didn't wait to find out, immediately triggering his awakening power. There was no guarantee that it would work. Thankfully it did, opening a realm the likes of which Dallion hadn't seen so far,

**You are in the land of CAR.**

**The land's destiny has been fulfilled.**

**Defeat the guardian to improve the realm.**

Seeing the rectangles again reminded Dallion of his awakening. In many aspects, it was exactly that, just better—the moment of pure bliss and thankfulness that came after waking up from a nightmare. Did all sealed feel that way? No wonder they changed so much afterwards. Now that he'd lost his powers once, Dallion was all the more conscious about it.

Reaching out, he tried to summon any of his weapons. Nothing appeared.

"Nox, Lux, Harp," Dallion said, looking around.

There was no reaction. All of his companions seemed to have left him.

Humming a tune to counter the bubbling sadness within him, Dallion looked around. The entire realm was an Escher's painting full of gears, pistons, pipes, and hundreds of other mechanical parts that composed one giant mechanism all the way to infinity. Nothing seemed dangerous or threatening, but this wasn't a realm Dallion would like to live in.

"Car?" he shouted loudly. "Where are you?"

Several seconds passed, then several more. The guardian didn't seem to have any intention of showing himself or even replying. Then. Dallion remembered one of the first things he had learned in the awakened world: guardians had to be found.

Items had their guardians locked within the guardian chamber, which had to be entered before any combat or conversations could take place. When it came to areas, the awakened had to scout the

realm multiple times specifically to find the hiding place of the entity. Nox had made things easier, having the ability to challenge guardians directly. Magic allowed for a few similar tricks.

Concentrating, Dallion tried to shape the realm. He wasn't a domain ruler anymore, and even if he was, he didn't own the car.

"So, that's how it is?" Dallion muttered. He was presented with two choices: spend several weeks' true time seeking the guardian out, or leave the realm and continue his conversation. After several moments of thought, Dallion decided to go for the second one.

The reality around him disappeared like ash blown away by the wind, returning him to the car.

Wow, mate! The guardian explained. You have the gift! I've never seen anything like that!

Have you talked with other cars? Dallion asked.

Do I look like a divinity, mate? The car laughed. Talking to them is the same as talking to people—a bloody waste of time that never leads to a response.

There went that idea. Clearly, no one had the empathy trait on Earth, no one that hadn't returned from the awakened world, that was.

You're one of the few that have the potential. The car continued. All of you shine in pretty colors.

How many more have you seen? Dallion couldn't let this pass.

*You, the girl, and some random guy. Only saw him once, but he was as deaf as the girl.*

That confirmed that there were at least three awakened. Dallion continued the conversation a bit longer, trying to figure out where and when the car had seen the third awakened, but the details were negligible to say the least. Unlike in the awakened world, items were a lot more limited here. They couldn't see their surroundings particularly well, only noticing things and people in contact with them or—at the very most—a few steps away. The car didn't even know where it was going. It divided its existence between still and moving, which seemed more than enough.

"Were you alive during the copyette wars?" Dallion switched the target of his conversation.

It had been ten minutes since they had left and during that time, neither he nor Atol had sparked a conversation. As awakened nobles, both kept their guard up at all times. Information was power, and they had gone to extremes to be vague when it came to anything beyond the obvious. Dallion had no idea if the woman had regained any other skills, just as she couldn't be sure about his abilities. There was no harm in reminiscing about their historical past, though.

"I lived in the era of humans." He took the first step in an effort to break the ice. "Millenia after the dryads tried to take over the world."

"The dryads?" Atol almost choked. "They actually had a go?"

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“Yes, but it was long before my time. I only know what was written down.”

“Probably bullshit.” She smirked. “Everyone I knew would rewrite everything several times per decade. I never saw the point.”

“Were you alive during the Nymph Wars?”

“Now, that’s before my time. I was out and about during the Great Flower Renaissance.” She turned towards Dallion, expecting a reaction. When none followed, the woman sighed and focused back on the road. “Guess it wasn’t so great.”

“Several thousand years is a long time,” Dallion felt the need to say. “Do you remember the language?”

“Are you kidding? My nanny was a dryad.”

Although the difference was barely noticeable, Dallion could sense that she was a lot more relaxed now than she had ever been since the two had met. It wasn’t that she trusted him—her guard remained up—but she had become more comfortable engaging in small talk.

“Couldn’t stand the witch. She’d constantly make me train and study. You’re expected to take over the county, milady,” Atol said in dryad. “The whole world might listen to you one day, and they will expect nothing short of perfection.”

“Sounds like a blast.” Dallion laughed.

“That she was. She’d vine me each time I tried to sneak out.” There was a momentary pause. “Then again, she’d also vine anyone trying to break in and kill me.” The woman’s tone softened.

By the sound of it, her experiences varied significantly from Dallion’s. Assassinations had become special occasion events. It was a lot more efficient to use power and politics to take down an adversary, or all-out war, when that failed. The Tamin capitol had become a massive tangled web of lies and deceit, and most of the world had mimicked it to perfection. Of course, it wasn’t like they had much of a say in the matter: Simon had made sure to make it so, nudging everyone behind the scenes.

“Was the Order running the show?” Dallion asked.

“Are there seven Moons?” Atol shook her head. “Fuckers were always the real power. I’m told they erased my first crush. Even now I don’t remember anything about it, other than that it happened. My parents were similar shitheads. They put me in a new room, replaced all my clothes and items, and burned all my diaries.”

“That’s a bit extreme.”

“They also burned down several houses in the city. No reason, no explanation. I knew, of course, but wasn’t allowed to say a word. It’s always difficult when you have an echo stuck in your realm.”

Dallion felt a chill run down his spine. Cities were dangerous places, indeed.

“How will we handle it once we’re there?” The woman changed the topic.

“They’ve seen me. Also, they’ve seen everyone I’ve sent.”

That was true. What made Dallion increasingly nervous was that he could only think of one awakened method capable of predicting the future. Combat splitting was impractical for long stretches of time. Technically, it was possible to rely on local technology—one could do wonders with drones and cameras nowadays, but somehow that didn’t seem right, either. More and more Dallion feared that they were dealing with actual prophecies and that, in turn, meant they’d be facing Simon.

“You listening?” The woman glanced towards Dallion.

“Yeah.” Dallion closed his eyes and leaned back in the seat. “I think it might be someone I know. He was skilled in foresight, though I didn’t think he’d keep that particular power.”

“Bullshit.”

“I might be wrong. Doesn’t matter, though. I have a way of tracking both of them down.”

“How?”

“Just take me to a place you know he’s been. I’ll pick it up from there.”

With several things on his mind, Dallion took the opportunity to take a short nap. Simon was the last person he expected to see, especially so soon. Back in the awakened world, the archbishop hadn’t given any indication that he was from the States, let alone that he had a family. If anything, he was the last person Dallion expected to have any attachments or interest. Obviously, time had changed him. There was every chance that the boy had returned twenty years in the past—just enough time to get used to Earth life, find someone, get married, and have a child that had inherited part of his gift. That had to be who Atol had tracked down—a reckless kid with the ability to have glimpses into the future, which he had used in one of the stupidest possible ways.

What will you do this time, Simon? Dallion wondered.

During the alliance of seven, the archbishop had made a vow not to hurt Dallion. That was before he had moved to Earth, though. Here, there was no Moon to ensure that the vow was kept. That meant he’d fight for real to protect his own child.

For ten minutes Dallion tried to fall asleep, but his mind wouldn’t let him. It wasn’t his concern about facing Simon that kept him up, but the discovery that he could enter realms. Even when faced with the prospect of facing a hostile awakened, Dallion kept itching to reenter another realm.



Opening one eye, he reached down into the backpack he had placed at his feet. There wasn't much valuable inside other than his laptop and a few clothes. His broken phone was also in there, still very much useless.

Let's see if I can fix things as well. Dallion grabbed hold of the casing, then slid a finger along the surface of the screen.

### **SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING**

Reality shifted, placing him in the middle of a cyberpunk realm full of endless circuits. LED lights the size of buildings were neatly arranged around him beneath a massive cracked sky made up entirely of displays. Earth realms were definitely a lot more imaginative.

**You are in the land of PHONE.**

**The land's destiny has been fulfilled.**

**Defeat the guardian to improve the realm.**

"Where's your labyrinth?" Dallion wondered.

The realm was significantly smaller than the car's, although still larger than a building. Approaching one of the LED buildings, Dallion attempted to combat split. A nauseous sensation quickly made him reconsider.

The effort was more than his body could handle. Gritting his teeth, Dallion persisted.

I've done it once, he thought. I'll manage again.

Returning all the way to the most basic principles Vend had taught him, Dallion tried to create a partial instance of his hand.

The feeling of nausea increased, this time joined by a thumping headache in his temples. It had been a while since Dallion had experienced such a degree of pain. It felt like his own internal organs were rebelling against what his body was attempting.

### **AVERAGE WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 10%**

A red rectangle appeared.

A wound? And just from trying? Only now did Dallion realize the boons that the Moons had given every person in the awakened world.

Waves of fear emerged, warning Dallion that if he didn't stop, he might suffer permanent damage.

Fighting the pain, Dallion began humming to counter the increasing feelings of dread. The effect, sadly, was negligible.

### **AVERAGE WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 10%**

Dallion's head felt as if it would explode. His left hand kept moving, yet instances refused to emerge.

## **AVERAGE WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 10%**

"I won't stop!" Dallion shouted.

His vision had become blurry, yet he still refused to give up. Then, for a fraction of a second, one of his fingers was in two places at once.

"You can rest now," Euryale's voice sounded, surrounding Dallion. "You made it."

Chapter 966: Personification of Doubt

"Eury," Dallion whispered.

The gorgon had changed since the last time he'd seen her, trading her sun gold armor for a casual Greek robe and what could only be described as a pair of medieval britches. She didn't seem particularly older than Dallion remembered her, although the snakes on her head had acquired a faint golden color.

Seeing her seemed to make the pain fade away, along with all the concerns and fears. Suddenly, nothing mattered anymore. His college days, Atol, even the hunt for the awakened seemed trivial and unnecessary.

"Splitting's never easy, especially the first time," the gorgon said.

Dallion took a step towards her, then stopped, almost fearing that if he'd continue, the realm would swallow her up.

"You've been reckless again." Eury's snakes moved about.

"Just a bit." Dallion looked at his left hand.

Two sets of fingers were moving about. That could only be described as pitiful by any definition, yet he felt a sense of achievement.

"I thought I lost you," he said, finally having the will to continue forward.

Without thinking, his arms wrapped around her, giving her the strongest hug he was capable of. To his relief, he also felt her arms on his back. Despite being overwhelmed by joy, he could clearly see how much he had weakened. Maybe he wasn't as weak as a non-awakened, yet he wasn't too far off.

"It's alright," Eury whispered. Dallion could tell she was careful not to hurt him.

For a short infinity the two remained silent, holding each other, afraid to let go of the moment. With every second, their fear slowly faded away.

"How is it?" the gorgon asked.

"How's what?"

"Your world."

“Ah.” Dallion opened his mouth to continue, but paused before the first words could come out. Back in the awakened world, he’d often tell her about the wonders that existed back home. They all seemed so mundane now, not to mention that he still felt slightly out of place here. “It’s the same as when I left,” he said.

“I see. I wish you could have shown it to me.”

“I will,” he said without hesitation. “I’ll find a way to show it to you. All of it.”

“I know you’ll try.” Euryale let go of him and took a step back.

The action felt confusing, but for some reason Dallion wasn’t able to react to it. He knew that she was about to move away, yet he didn’t have the will to even try to stop her.

“Don’t go,” he said.

“I’m always here.”

“Eury, don’t—” Dallion rose up, suddenly finding himself in a rather small place.

It was dark with only a scattering of LED lights around him. A rhythmic hum was coming from everywhere, along with the faint sensation of constant vibrations.

“Finally up?” a female voice asked, though it wasn’t Euryale’s.

Things slowly came into focus. Once he was used to the faint light, Dallion was able to make out where he was. What initially seemed like a bed was a rather long seat. The lights were indicators for charging spots, read lights, and buttons with which to call for service and assistance.

A plane, Dallion said to himself. He had no memory of getting here. The last he remembered, he had been in Atol’s car on the way to the airport. No. Actually, he had been in his phone.

Atol was further down, watching some movie on the internal entertainment system. It couldn’t be said that the plane was top of the line, but it still had a level of luxury reserved for private jets. Dallion didn’t want to think who she had convinced to lend her this.

“What happened?” slowly he sat up.

“Your nose started bleeding, then you fainted.” The woman didn’t sound in the least bit concerned. “Lucky you didn’t mess up your clothes. I wouldn’t have been able to talk my way through that.”

“Thanks, you’re a lifesaver.” Dallion put in every ounce of sarcasm he could muster. “Where’s my phone?”

“With the rest of your things. I got you a new one. You can switch the SIM before we land. I also got you some clothes.”

Instinctively, Dallion checked to see if his old ones were still on him. They were.

“When do we land?”

“We’ve still got a few hours. Nap if you want.”

Sleeping was the last thing Dallion wanted. He’d slept enough already. Furthermore, there was the chance that he’d dream, and right now, that was the last thing he wanted. There was always the danger he’d see Eury if he did, only to lose her yet again.

“I’ll do that,” he lied.

Something had happened between the time he’d entered the realm of the phone and the time he found himself here. Back in the awakened world, he’d have a dozen echoes and familiars telling him exactly what had happened. Harp, Adzorg, and Vihrogon would be going on and on about what he had done wrong and how to avoid doing it in the future. Well, maybe not Vihrogon. The dryad was a former companion item, after all.

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Plane, Dallion said. Can you hear me?

It was a long shot, but if it had worked for the car, there was every chance it would work for the plane as well.

You can talk? A deep voice asked.

That was good, but far from a relief.

*How did I get here?*

Being able to talk is no excuse to avoid regulations, the guardian said flatly. Before you ask for assistance, you should clearly introduce yourself.

Given the circumstances, anyone would be forgiven to react harshly. Dallion, though, knew better. He wasn’t a world conqueror anymore. Here he was, just someone trying to find a way back home.

Sorry about that, he said. I’m Dallion.

Nice to make your acquaintance, the plane replied with understanding. Back to your question. You were carried here by the woman and a few airport regulars.

That solved one mystery, at least. Still, there was no way Atol had remained as calm as she claimed to be. If Dallion had fainted in the middle of their conversation—and had blood running from his nose—anyone would have rushed to the nearest hospital or medical center. At worst, she would have done so at the airport. The fact that she didn’t, guaranteed there was something she was keeping secret from him.

It was possible, in theory, for her to have some healing abilities. Music skills alone were capable of providing some relief. When combined with spellcraft, it could heal serious injuries. Atol didn’t have the magic trait, though.

*How did you learn to talk? Humans normally couldn’t do that.*

I’m special, Dallion replied.

Right now, he was at a disadvantage. He couldn't confront Atol directly at the moment, but there was no way he'd let that pass. Come to think of it...

Plane, could you create some turbulence? he asked.

*Why would I? That would be a breach of flight ethics. I'm a professional. Someone of my excellence couldn't possibly—*

It's important, Dallion interrupted, trying to use his music skills. I just need you to do it for a few seconds. No one will doubt your professionalism.

The guardian didn't reply. Dallion could almost sense his hesitation. It was time for one more push.

*I need to find out what she did.*

Everything briefly shook as the plane descended. That was all that Dallion needed. Using every ounce of speed, he sprinted out of his seat, going directly for Atol. The action seemed so slow compared to everything he had done in the awakened world. There was no way he could manage to reach her before she became aware.

Left with no other choice, Dallion decided to risk it. Holding his breath, he attempted to combat split.

A wave of pain passed through him, as if he had been briefly struck by lightning. Thankfully, it wasn't enough to cause him to faint. Even better—an instance of him continued forward, while the other leapt straight for the woman. Two realities took place simultaneously. One was faster than the other. In it, Dallion covered the woman's mouth before she could make a sound. Naturally, that was the reality he chose to remain.

"Not a word," he whispered, pressing against her carotid arteries with his fingers.

Almost immediately, the woman froze. Clearly, she had relied too much on her music skills to engage in physical contact.

"What really happened?" Slowly Dallion removed his hand from her mouth.

"Nothing happened." The woman made an attempt to tie in a subtle music thread among her words.

Dallion tightened his grip round her throat slightly.

"Okay!" she quickly said, still in a hushed tone. "I'll tell you."

Dallion loosened his grip again.

"You suddenly split into instances," she said. "It wasn't much. Not like now. I didn't even see any changes, but I felt it happen. Then, your nose started bleeding. I pulled up on side of the the road, but you were gone."

"Dead?"

“Fainted. It still freaked me out. I was about to turn back to your college when...”  
There was a moment of silence. “You muttered a name. Euryale.”

“My wife’s name.”

“It’s a gorgon’s name.” Even now, the woman sounded terrified. “You aren’t human, are you? That’s why you want to go back.”

That’s what she thought? Not something one would expect. It also could explain her reluctance to get doctors involved. If Dallion was masking his appearance, the first medical professional would find out, which would lead to serious issues for the both of them.

“I’m on your fucking side, okay?” Atol insisted.

Surprisingly, Dallion removed his hand.

“I’m not a gorgon,” he said. “But my wife is. And I am going back.”

As the seconds dragged on, the turbulence abruptly ceased, returning the flight to its expected smoothness. The plane guardian had done his job well and now went back to ensuring that the flight was as perfect as possible.

Not needing to press his point further, Dallion sat in the seat opposite Atol. He never thought that gorgons had changed so much throughout the ages. It was understandable, though. The furies despised the ground and everyone living on it... until they were utterly defeated, becoming a scattering of servants and mercenary tribes that worked for the highest bidder. The same must have happened to the gorgons. Of all the races in the awakened world, the least was known about them. Euryale, like every other gorgon Dallion had met, knew very little about their history and discussed even less.

“What else could you do?” Atol asked. “Other than splitting.”

This was a crossroads question. Telling her risked Dallion keeping the edge. Not doing so, risked losing her trust.

“I can talk to guardians,” Dallion revealed half the truth.

“No shit?!” She instantly leaned forward towards him.

“That’s why we need to find a place he’s been.”

“Shit Dal. That’s massive.”

“I can’t convince people, and I can’t fight worth crap.” He put things into perspective. “Our target can split as well. Also, I’m almost sure he has foresight.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“It’s either that or magic. Take your pick.”

Either choice was bad, but magic was worse. Normally, Dallion would spend a while within the awakened realms re-learning more of his skills. The price was rather high. Although it didn’t seem like it, he was far from his best. The best way to describe it was having been through a serious case

of the flu—weak, though not enough to be noticed by others. Getting his health reduced by a third tended to have such an effect.

“We’ll need five hours after we land. It should be about noon by then.”

“That’s fine. The plan isn’t to hide.”

“What if they come after us?” Atol asked the question on both of their minds.

“Even together we can’t match an attack skill.”

“We make sure we’re never alone,” Dallion said. “You’ll make sure we’re protected. I’ll make sure to take our targets down.”

Chapter 967: The Ring no one Remembered

The trip to the airport felt seamless. Dallion managed to catch about an hour of sleep before the plane landed. The airport Atol had chosen was tiny, with barely enough space for two passenger airplanes. At present, there was only one other private jet there, though it was scheduled to take off in a few days. If all went well, Dallion would be off before that.

A black sports car was already waiting for them, all prepped up and ready to go.

“You certainly travel in style.” Dallion glanced at the woman. “When did you arrange this?”

“Before we set off,” she replied with a smirk. “I’m even better at convincing people on the phone.”

“That’s for sure.”

Dallion got in on the passenger’s side.

Hi, he said as he put on his safety belt.

Hello, a silky female voice said. You two seem fun.

Thanks. Clearly guardians could distinguish between awakened and ordinary people. They just happened to be nearsighted, for lack of a better term. Though I bet you say that to everyone you chat with.

*Only some,* the car chuckled. *You’re the first that’s answered, though.*

Now Dallion could be certain that no other awakened had driven the car. It was interesting how calm items were compared to those in the awakened world. So far, none of them had come across anyone who could talk with them, and still, they didn’t appear particularly disturbed by the notion. It was rather like they had experienced a pleasant surprise—like a person who’d received an additional item from the vending machine.

Can I ask for a favor? Dallion leaned back into the seat. I’d like to try to take a nap, so can you make the ride as smooth as possible? My friend tends to be a bit reckless.

I like reckless. The car chuckled some more. But sure. Only because you're a smooth talker.

I knew you were special. Dallion closed his eyes. Thanks.

Part of him hoped that the nap would let him have another chat with Eury. That wasn't the case. Instead, Dallion dreamed of finals. He was in the front row, going through a test that was ten times as difficult as anything they had taught so far. The questions required knowledge in several disciplines to make out what was required.

The seven Moons were also taking the test, for some obscure reason. They were in human form, though their clothes and hair made it clear to Dallion who they really were. Astreza was the greatest asshole of the bunch, finishing his test with minutes to spare. Berannah—the know-it-all—was second. Galatea was an obvious cheat, casting spells to see the answers. It annoyed Dallion beyond measure how the teacher didn't catch him even once. Emion was also cheating, although she just copied the answers from everyone around her. Dararr had finished her test as soon as it had begun and was spending the rest of the time snoozing on her desk.

"You're focusing too hard," Felygn said, as his pen was solving the test for him. "You just need to relax and let things unfold."

A desk away, Cantor was glaring at the test with such intensity that Dallion thought it would catch fire.

"How much do you have left?" the Green Moon asked.

"Halfway there," Dallion replied.

"The second half is always easier." Felygn leaned back. "Just don't forget to turn the last page."

The way he said that made Dallion curious. Stopping whatever he was doing, he picked up the test and looked at the back of the last page.

**Have you taken the test before?**

The question was written in large black letters within a blue rectangle.

"What does that mean?" Dallion turned to Felygn.

"Now you know how I feel," Cantor grumbled. "Nothing makes sense."

Dallion was just about to make a comment when it suddenly turned out that the professor conducting the test was none other than his roommate.

"Time's up, dude," the boy said, placing his hand on Dallion's shoulder.

Moments later, Dallion opened his eyes.

"You okay?" Atol asked, shaking him.

"Yeah," Dallion replied with a yawn.



His dreams had become quite weird the last few days. Then again, it wasn't the first time he'd experienced something of the sort. It seemed that the intensity of the dreams was linked with unlocking his awakening abilities. The same had happened in the awakened world. The first few times he'd had strange dreams of home, constantly mixing events from his past with the present situation he was in.

"Are we here?" Dallion stretched.

"Welcome to Bristol," the woman said. "Population two thousand, give or take."

This novel's true home is a different platform. Support the author by finding it there.

Dallion got out of the car. The town was slightly more modern than he imagined, though still the typical small settlement that only existed because it was right on a major highway. Like hundreds of others, it was in the middle of nowhere, with a somewhat aging population. Most of the people visible were in their late forties and older, though there were also a few groups of teenagers and children hidden away, staring with curiosity.

"Are we welcome?" Dallion looked at Atol.

"If not, we will be," she replied. "That's the store in which he first made it big." She tilted her head in the direction of the proverbial general store that existed in such towns. It seemed larger than one might think, well-kept and well stocked.

If this was the where the awakened first displayed his power, it was a safe bet to assume that he had moved out long ago. In his shoes, Dallion would have specifically traveled away from home, so as not to attract attention. Chances were that no one knew him. Then again, it was possible he had left things behind.

Thanks for the ride. Dallion closed the door behind him.

A pleasure, tiger, the car replied.

The store had one of those bells attached to the door that rang when someone opened it. It was clearly only for character, for inside it had a lot of the electronic comforts one might expect: air-conditioning, flatscreen TVs, and a stack of microwaves next to the frozen section.

From what Dallion could see, there were five people inside—all of them employees, judging by the matching t-shirts.

"'ello," a large middle-aged man with gray hair said. "Nice to see you again. Caught your guy?"

For a split-second Dallion thought the man was talking to him. He re-evaluated his opinion. Of course, the man would be talking to Atol. She must have gone through here the last time she was searching for clues.

"Almost, Earl, almost," the woman said with a smile.

"Bounties must be rough for you to come back again."

“You know what they say—there’s always a big one. How have you been doing?”

“Same as ever. How is it that you kids say... not great, not terrible?” The man laughed. Judging by the expressions of the younger employees, the comment was considered quite cringe.

“Only you say that, Earl.” Atol shook her head in polite fashion. “Some ice-cream and a stack of soda. It’s an oven out there.”

“Sure thing. Same as last time?”

“I’m touched that you remember.”

Dallion forced himself not to react. Knowing the woman, she had probably nudged the memory into the man’s mind.

“Say, is it okay if we look about again? I have a new assistant.”

The storekeeper gave Dallion an evaluative look.

“You sure pick them young. Kid looks like he’s still in college.”

“That’s why he’s doing the tracking and I’ll be doing the catching,” Atol said.

“He’d got a talent for these things. Had to snatch him on loan from the FBI.”

“The FBI?” the man noted. As he did, everyone stopped whatever they were doing and focused their attention on Dallion. In their mind, he was probably one of those prodigies everyone saw on TV, though no one knew in person. “Sure, go ahead. I’ve moved things a bit since last time, mind you.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Dallion made his way to the snacks section near the counter.

“Did he get anything from here? Gum maybe?”

“Wow. You really are good?” The store owner nodded, impressed. “Sure did. Took a few packets while going through the cards. Gum’s different, mind you. And so are the scratch cards.”

“No matter.” Dallion moved closer. “I just need the rack.”

Hi, he addressed it. How are things?

You can talk? The stand guardian replied. First time that’s happened.

*Yeah. I get that a lot. Seen anyone else who could talk?*

There was a moment of silence. Dallion could almost sense the hesitation coming from the guardian, almost as if he had, but had been told not to mention it to anyone.

Nah, it said at last. Seen a few who were special, though.

*A few?*

*Yeah. A kid younger than you and a woman who came later looking for him. Both of them took gum.*

*What flavor?*

There was a long pause. The guardian tried to remember an event that, for it, had taken place years ago, if not longer.

Apple cherry for the kid, the guardian said at last. And... vanilla for the woman.

There was a vanilla bubblegum flavor? Dallion winced at the notion. Complaining about someone's taste was for another time, though. The important thing now was to get as much information as possible.

Did anything stand out? he asked.

*About the kid? He had a massive ring.*

Hardly a good descriptor. Even in the awakened world, jewelry wasn't something Dallion could use. Maybe if he knew a bit about the guardian of the ring, he might come to some conclusion, but

---

*One of those sports rings. People sure love them a lot.*

"Say." Dallion' turned to the store owner. "Did the guy have a sports ring of sorts? Maybe a championship ring?"

"Huh?" The man blinked, then quickly frowned. "Son, don't you think I'd have noticed something like..." his words trailed off. Dallion could almost see an echo disintegrating in his mind. His expression changed, as if he had been dragged out of a fog back into the real world. "Actually, he might have had something like that." He concentrated harder. "Actually, he did. A state championship twenty-twenty-three. Can't believe I forgot about that. Must be getting old."

"Nonsense," Atol quickly said. Her voice was full of calm. "It's hardly something important."

"Guess not." The man nodded, not at all aware of how he was contradicting himself. "There really isn't much to say about the guy. He was just some blond kid that came in, made a few hundred bucks and left."

"Yeah, I know. And you've been a great help." Atol intensified the strands of music within her words. "How much for the sodas?"

It wasn't lost on Dallion that she had nudged the storeowner to give her the ice-cream for free. Possibly as a way to balance things out, he left a folded note on the counter in thanks for the "information."

Picking up the stack of soda cans, Dallion left the store, making his way to the car. Atol joined him half a minute later.

"They won't remember a thing," she said.

“Whoever made him forget didn’t use music,” Dallion noted as he tore out a soda from the pack and tossed it to her.

“Echoes?” the woman asked.

“Looks like.” He took one for himself and opened it. If someone could use echoes, that made things a bit more difficult. On the positive side. It seemed like the echoes were easy to get rid of. “Did you get some vanilla gum last time you were here?”

“I felt like trying it,” the woman replied, unapologetically. “Tasted like crap.”

Dallion took another gulp.

“So, what now?”

“We have the year. Should be easy to find who were last year’s state champions. Know anyone who could help?”

“Think so. Will take us a while to get there. There are other big cities that are closer. I can convince people to help there.”

“No. Better stick to people you’ve convinced. Whoever we’re after knows we’re here. If they can put echoes in people, they can put them in anything.”

Chapter 968: The Boy and the Daggers

It took over a day to reach the city in question—not too bad by local standards, but nowhere as fast as Dallion would have gotten there if he could fly.

The town approached a proper city with an official population of just over a hundred thousand. From what Atol shared, it was at least fifty percent more, with many people coming here just for work, without actually being residents. In other words, this was probably a perfect place for someone to hide in. Ironically, everything pointed to the awakened target actually living here.

There were several local law enforcement agencies that Atol had had dealings with in her past visit, as well as a number of private detectives. Of course, when she had mentioned she had something special in mind, Dallion never expected what would follow.

“A Marshal’s office?” he asked, not even sure why there would be one in a place like this.

“It sounds more impressive than it is. There’s just a couple of people there, but one of them knows his stuff.”

“If you say so.” Dallion didn’t seem at all encouraged.

“Trust me, he’s the real boomer. Also, the real deal.”

The description was even more questionable, but with nothing left, Dallion closed the car door as the woman made her way into the small, unassuming building.

Okay to ask another favor? he asked the car.

*How can one refuse you?* the car replied in her usual voice.

*If you see someone who's like me, stay calm, but then let me know. Okay?*

*Sure.*

The inside of the building was just as unassuming as the outside. It was almost as if time had forgotten this house, keeping it the same, stubbornly refusing to enter the new century. The desks, phones, the fans, even the single TV were ancient. Of course, that didn't prevent everyone present from tapping on their laptops and tablets.

"Matt," Atol said, heading directly to a thin, gray-haired man with the biggest mustache Dallion had seen in all the worlds he'd visited. "Have a moment for me?"

As the woman spoke, strands of music made sure to impose her authority, keeping anyone not involved from interfering, while also attracting the old man's attention. For some reason, Dallion could almost sense that half of the music attack had been deflected.

"Miss Waters," the man said with a stern look, although beneath his mustache, the corners of his mouth had curved in a slight smile. "I wasn't expecting to see you again. Not after last time."

"Why not?" For a split second, the woman was caught off guard.

"After all those fancy detectives you sent last time failed, I thought you'd lost interest in this place. Either that or you found whoever you've been looking for."

"Other things popped up." Atol regained her composure. "I have a new assistant now."

"Him?" The man gave Dallion a questionable look. He was joined by the three other people in the one room office. "You sure pick them young. This kid shouldn't even be in college."

"He's good at what he does."

"If you say so." The man shrugged. "Jimmy, bring some coffee, will you?" he shouted to one of the other people in the room. A broad-shouldered man who could well be the old man's son, stood up with a slight grumble, then went to what one might assume to be the building's kitchen. "So, what have you found?"

The question was unexpected. Rather, it wasn't so much the question as the certainty of it.

"Why do you think we've found anything?" Dallion took the lead.

"Son, if I need to explain it to you, that doesn't make you a good detective. I hope that's not what Miss Waters hired you for."

“Matt, please,” Atol said in her most beguiling voice. “He’s good at what he does. It’s thanks to him that we got a clue. Just as you suggested.”

The man’s expression remained just as stern.

“US Marshal Matthew Williams,” he said in a deep voice. “And you would be?”

“Dallion,” Dallion replied. He made an attempt to use some of his own music skills. Whether or not it worked remained uncertain, though the marshal didn’t ask for his family name. “The person we’re looking for had a state champion’s ring, twenty-twenty-three. Football.”

The deputy marshal returned with two mugs of coffee. One was given to Matt, the other the man kept for himself. Apparently, the refreshments weren’t meant for Dallion or Atol.

“State football champion. That’ll narrow things down to twenty kids.” Matthew took a gulp from his mug. “A description would have been nice.”

“That’s the problem with this one. No descriptions. If it was easy, I wouldn’t be constantly sending people here.”

“I suppose not. You could have made it official, of course. I’d have taken the matter myself.”

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

“It’s important, but not that important.”

“Sure.” The man finished his mug and slammed it on the desk. “Jimmy, get a list of the kids on the football roster for Miss Waters, here.”

“You already know who they are?” Dallion sounded impressed.

“Everyone in this town knows who they are. They’re the equivalent of local heroes.”

“Which means that people won’t be too thrilled having anything happen to one of them.” The deputy marshal called “Jimmy” said.

“Oh, I’m sure Miss Waters will tread lightly on this one. Isn’t that right?”

“You know me too well, Matt.” Atol smiled. The amount of music strands in her voice was so high that Dallion could almost see them.

The marshal was just about to add something else when the alarm of Atol’s car suddenly went off. On the surface, there was nothing unusual about that. It wouldn’t be the first time that a fancy car would suffer a few local keys. However, in this particular instance, neither Dallion nor Atol had set the alarm. In fact, they hadn’t even locked the doors, assuming no one would attempt anything in front of the marshal’s office. The fact that Dallion could hear the alarm meant only one thing—the car was telling him she’d seen something that merited his attention.

“Damn it!” Dallion dashed towards the exit.

It took him just over three seconds to get outside, just in time to see an out-of-place teen a few steps from the car. He was one of those boys that looked old for their age, though not old enough as they wanted. Work jeans, military shoes, and what at some point had been a biker’s jacket, desperately attempted to pull him into the mid-twenties, yet failed in spectacular fashion.

That wasn’t all that Dallion saw, though. Apart from being away from the car, the teen was also in it, going through the glove compartment, as it were.

Combat splitting, Dallion thought.

And it was quite advanced, too. While the number of instances left a lot to be desired, the teen managed to hold them well within the seconds. Dallion would be hard pressed to match the skill.

In his mind, time slowed down, as he was forced to make a split-second decision. He could chase after the teen directly, though that would be pointless. With such a mastering of splitting, the boy could rush in opposite directions and switch to the instance that held him to a greater advantage. And that was in case he didn’t proceed to attack, as most awakened in the awakened world would.

Dallion could, of course, wait for Atol and—hopefully—the marshals, but only risked giving the boy a greater head start. Thus, he chose to attempt a third option; concentrating, he attempted to force splice the boy’s instance.

As Vend used to say back in the Icepicker guild, “once you learn basic splitting, everything else is just picking up the trick.” While technically true, it had taken the dragons weeks to learn how to do it, not to mention that even after years, Euryale remained terrible at splitting, let alone anything more complicated.

In his mind, Dallion visualized two realities, each separate from the other. Then he homed in, focusing on the one he wanted. A loud snap filled his ears, as if a short circuit had occurred, and then it happened. The instance of the teen that was away vanished, leaving him entirely in the car.

“Got you,” Dallion whispered out of habit.

The teen—who had realized that something unusual had happened—quickly pulled out of the car. His glance focused on Dallion. In that second, both knew what the other was. Each was evaluating the other’s skills, assessing what the best course of action would be. It was a quick evaluation, for the boy turned around and ran almost instantly.

“Stop!” Dallion shouted, in an attempt to use music skills, as he dashed after him.

Thanks, car! He said as he rushed past her.

In response, the alarm suddenly stopped.

“Hold up!” Atol said, sprinting behind Dallion. She had managed to get out of the building rather fast as well, but was slowed down by the impractical nature of her attire. The platform boots, while subjectively stylish, made running a pain even for a former countess.

“He can split!” Dallion said.

Almost on cue, the boy they were chasing attempted to split into three instances. Sadly, for him, the attempt was no better than the last. Now that Dallion had gotten the hang of it, he quickly chose the most beneficial instance. Five seconds later, the process repeated again.

Like a deer in the headlights, Dallion thought.

The awakened had definitely not been to the awakened world. Unsure of what was going on, he attempted to use his old tricks to get away, yet only made them catch up all the more. If things continued like this, in half a minute Dallion would be able to grab him and—

Suddenly, a new splitting was triggered. Dallion felt it, and immediately followed, splitting into three instances.

Out of nowhere, a woman on a motorbike appeared, moving perpendicular to the line of pursuit. She was older than the boy, and by far more experienced. For starters, while her instances were merely two, they weren’t affected by Dallion’s force attempts.

The woman drove up to the boy, then grabbed him as effortlessly as if he were a floating T-shirt and put him on the bike behind her.

“Stop!” Atol ordered.

Music strands went in all directions, causing every ordinary person in earshot to freeze mid-step. Even the boy seemed affected, though not the woman on the bike. Instead, she reached to her belt, then sent a dagger straight at Atol. In two of Dallion’s instances, the dagger hit Atol in the chest. In the third, he managed to push her to the ground just in time to avoid it. Naturally, that instance became reality, though at a cost: the awakened teen and the woman had managed to escape.

“What the hell?!” Atol whispered, more shocked than angered. “That actually happened?”

“Yep.” Slowly, Dallion got back up.

As the effects of the music order were fading away, people in the vicinity returned to normal, which meant looking at the scene with disbelief and discussing what had occurred.

“We’ve come upon someone who’s retained an attack skill,” Dallion said what was on both their minds. “And can also split.”

“Two people who can split, that can’t be good.”

Dallion didn’t have the heart to tell her that this was only the tip of the iceberg. Despite all her attempts so far, that was the only person—or people—that Atol had managed to get firm evidence on. It had taken both of them working together, not to mention a lot of luck, to get a glimpse of them. Given how many otherworlders there were, there could be hundreds, or even thousands of awakened throughout the world; these two were those clumsy enough to let themselves be spotted.

“You two alright?” Deputy marshal “Jimmy” arrived at the scene. The actual marshal was a fair distance behind.



“Fine.” Dallion looked at the ground. The knife had slid down the pavement a short distance away. There was nothing special about it, but it remained an item and, as such, he could obtain more than enough information from it.

“Whatever you’re involved with, I need all the details,” the deputy insisted.

“We’re dealing with a murder attempt here, so—”

“It’s not your case,” Atol said, using the full extent of her music skills. “We’ll handle this, though we’d appreciate the help.”

Help, Dallion said to himself. They had been sloppy. It was going to take a lot more to catch their targets, and the help of a few marshals wasn’t going to change that one bit.

#### Chapter 969: Car Guardian Battle

A great number of things could be assumed by the small encounter that Dallion had experienced. For starters, the initial target was wild and sloppy. He definitely wasn’t a late bloomer—a lot of training had gone into honing the skills he had, yet unlike the awakened world, he had done so in a complete vacuum. Any and all new experiences put him off his game entirely. If Dallion were to guess, he hadn’t seen a hostile awakened before, let alone faced one. That, in turn, brought to the second participant.

Way more experienced, she knew exactly how to act in combat, achieving the most with the least amount of effort. She had the ability to combat split, as well as at least an attack skill, giving her the upper hand. Atol would have to convince several dozen trained professionals to assist in order to have a chance at victory, and even then, nothing was guaranteed. With someone like that, there could only be one reason why the boy wasn’t more prepared: the woman never wanted him to have awakened powers. It also meant that the teen had trained himself in secret.

“What about this?” A court sketch artist showed a picture to Dallion and Atol.

Nearly all the features were drawn as described, but Dallion couldn’t help but feel that either of them would do a better job. In different circumstances, he would have had a go. Doing so now, though, was bound to raise further suspicions.

“Looks about right,” he said and turned to Atol.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Good thing that you have sharp memories,” the sketch artist said, handing the sheet of paper to the marshal.

“Lucky that she wasn’t wearing a helmet,” the old man noted. “I’d call that a pretty peculiar coincidence.” He cast Dallion a glance. “The first time you’re here after Lord knows how long and the suspect stumbles onto you less than a minute after your visit.”

“It’s a rather expensive car.” Dallion tried to play it down, but there was no denying it was too much of a coincidence.

The marshal gave him a look, as if Dallion's fly was unzipped, then handed the sheet to his deputy.

"Anything on that, Jimmy?"

"Patricial Legrand," the other said, barely glancing at the picture. "Has a small ranch a few hours from here. Used to be in a biker gang as a child. Lots of issues there, until one day she went straight and fixed her life in a single go. Has friends and family in Atlanta, which she avoids. Worked at the ranch as a farm hand for a while until the owner added her to the will. There was an investigation, but no foul play was suspected. The old man didn't have much, plus most of his family didn't want anything to do with him."

Everyone stared at the deputy marshal.

"She also has a son who graduated last year and was on the state champion's team. He didn't play, but as part of the team he got a ring." The man smirked. "I went through the files while you were busy with the sketch. Thought there might be some connection."

"Looks like you found it," Atol said. "Name?"

"Kul Legrand," the deputy continued. "Tried to change it twice. Not the best name to have growing up. School must have been hell."

"I bet." The marshal nodded. "Got the address, Jimmy?"

"Absolutely, Marshal."

The two men looked at each other. Even a non-awakened would clearly understand that they weren't willing to share the information with civilians. Then again, none of them had a way to defend against Atol's voice.

"Do we get to see?" she asked, using her music skills at full blast.

"It might not be the best idea," the deputy said reluctantly. "We won't have you chasing after her alone."

"Now, Jimmy. Miss Waters won't go out there alone, will you, miss?"

"I wouldn't dream of it, matt." The woman smiled.

"What did I tell you? Get the car ready. We'll be heading there after I finish my coffee."

"Our car is faster," Dallion said, and already regretted it. The glance that both men gave him made it clear they weren't in the best of moods, and any arguments wouldn't improve their composure.

In the end, things happened as the marshals wanted. Dallion and Atol had to suffer a ride in the back of a car, with Matt and Jimmy in front. It was just like going to a family outing, but worse. The

speed was slow, the heat—unbearable, and if the deputy was to be believed, it would be at least three hours before they got anywhere near.

Hey, Dallion told the car.

Howdy, the old Ford replied.

*Any chance you can fix the air conditioning?*

*Sorry, kid. Darned thing hasn't worked for years. Don't worry, though. That builds character. Just something a city slicker like you needs.*

To some degree, it could be argued to be the case. Dallion, though, wasn't in the mood.

### **SPHERE AREA AWAKENING**

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Reality shifted.

The realm of the ford was a lot more rustic than one might expect. Metal and wood were combined, creating a multitude of bulky mechanisms that went all the way to the horizon.

“No wonder you're in such a condition,” Dallion said, stepping towards a nearby iron pillar. Rust and corrosion covered every part of it, giving a fifty-fifty chance that it had completely hollowed out.

Carefully, Dallion slid a finger along the pillar while applying some pressure. The surface gave in, causing a small crack to form.

“I can fix that.” Dallion quickly pulled his finger back. “I can fix all of you, if you want.”

Almost on cue, a large entity emerged from the ground some fifty steps away. There was no doubt that it was the realm's guardian. For one thing, it wasn't a creature at all. It was both a combination of parts, but also not. Describing it was difficult, if not impossible. It had the notion of a car, yet wasn't. gears and pistons composed its frame, yet remained unattached. If someone were to see a picture of it, they would say that someone had made a jigsaw of various car parts, placing them together just to make a whole.

“That's the problem with you youngins,” the guardian said with its thick accent. “You never know what builds character and what not. You also never know when to leave things be.”

“I'm older than I look.” Dallion tried to summon a weapon again. Unfortunately, nothing happened. He also tried to concentrate and see the guardian's information rectangle.

For a fraction of a second, a white outline flashed in and out of existence, yet didn't remain long enough for him to make anything out.

“You’re different, kid. I can tell that much. You’re still too young to be meddling with things here.”

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

At least fighting worked the same way. Seeing the rectangle, Dallion split into two instances and quickly leaped back.

A long slash attack followed. It was particularly frightening how parts of the guardian recombined, creating an arm with a rather long reach and a razor sharp edge. There had been no green markers, no warnings, no indication of what to do to defend himself.

Last time I complain about guard skills, Dallion thought as he changed direction, dashing forward with one of his instances. Already he knew that he couldn’t defeat the guardian as he was. Although his speed and reflexes were greater than those of normal humans, he’d need the effects of an awakened skill to win. On the other hand, it was the perfect opportunity to re-learn one.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion attempted to leap over the guardian’s next attack, then land a strike in the chest area where a series of pistons were moving.

By his estimation, there was a ten percent chance that such a hit did any damage. Unfortunately for him, the instance didn’t survive long enough for the attack. The car’s strike sliced him in two, forcing him to switch to the other reality.

“You seem to play it safe,” the guardian said. Unable to combat split, all he saw was Dallion retreat. “Winning is for the brave, kid. You can’t win if you don’t attack.”

“Who says I’m not?” Dallion split again.

This time, he attempted to slide beneath the arc strike with the aim of jumping back up later. The attempt was only marginally successful. While the initial attack was avoided, the guardian’s arm transformed again, causing a piston to burst through Dallion’s chest.

You really aren’t playing around, Dallion thought.

He didn’t have an emblem here, so there was no telling what would happen if he’d lose. In fact, if it wasn’t for the combat splitting, this would have proven quite perilous. Then again, without combat splitting, Dallion wouldn’t have been as reckless. There was one thing that the guardian was right about, though—there was no victory without attacking.

Time after time Dallion would combat split only to have another of his instances be dispatched out of existence. There was no doubt that he was getting better, but progress was painfully slow; also combat splitting was just as exhausting as he remembered. Barely had he gone through ten splits when he was already breathing heavily.

“You’re a total mess, kid,” the guardian said in disapproving fashion. “I see you have guts, but you’ll need more.”

That much was obvious. If things continued as they were, Dallion would slowly fizzle out until he could no longer combat split at all. Back in the awakened world, he'd have risked everything and gone on one final attack, but that would be wrong. The whole point of his attacks wasn't to land a hit, but somehow to reignite his skill. Last time that had cost him a third of his health. Could it be that was the requirement?

Concentrating, Dallion focused on the guardian. The entity was twice as tall and lethal, though not outright aggressive; that meant it didn't go on a rampage chasing after Dallion. Like an old veteran, its moves were precise, a result of decades of experience.

I just need to get hit, Dallion thought. But not killed.

Splitting again, he charged forward.

An attack followed—the same that had been killing his instance so many times so far. Unlike all previous approaches, Dallion didn't attempt to evade it... at least not fully. Moving back just enough to prevent him from being severed.

As the sharp edge approached, Dallion gritted his teeth, blocking it with both hands.

## **MAJOR WOUND**

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

The pain swept through him, almost making him switch to his other instance. However, his strength of will proved greater. The healthy instance faded away, with the injured one becoming reality. That wasn't all. Suddenly, a green cone became visible—the potential attack zone that he had to avoid.

Of course it would be guard. Dallion laughed internally as he quickly set off to complete a full sequence.

With everything he went through in his previous battles, he'd have thought that the guardian would do everything in its power to prevent that, but that wasn't the case. A series of standard attacks followed, each just as fast and avoidable as the last.

Time slowed down more and more until it came to a complete stop.

“Sorry about this,” Dallion said. “But I really need the air conditioning.”

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

Next thing Dallion knew, he was back in the car, only this time he could feel a cool flow of air.

“That's new,” the marshal said, then placed his hand on the car's aircon to make sure he wasn't imagining things. “Thought that thing was out of order.”

Immediately, Atol gave Dallion a warning glance. She strongly suspected that he was involved, and didn't approve of it.

“Wake me when we get there,” Dallion said. Exhaustion made his eyelids feel like lead bars. “I'll take a nap.”

“We’re less than two hours away,” the woman raised her voice, but it was already too late. Dallion had fallen asleep.

Chapter 970: The One that Came Before

Waking up was unpleasant, almost painful. Dallion felt as if he had been partying all night. His head was thumping, and his eyelids refused to move for long periods of time. When Atol had shaken him, he felt as if he was being woken up for school.

“Dal,” the woman said, using her music skills to up his mood. “We’re almost there.”

Good thing for the benefits of music. Suppressing a yawn, Dallion straightened up. So far, he had managed to restore one skill and two abilities—not bad, considering. Even so, he would have preferred to have acquired attack as well.

“Are you up, kid?” the marshal asked.

The question was an obvious excuse to leave him in the car.

“I’m fine,” Dallion responded. “Is that the place?” he asked, looking at a dot of a house in the distance.

“Remember, this is our business now. You’re just observers.”

“And witnesses,” the deputy added.

“That’s not what we agreed, Matt,” Atol made a point of sounding disappointed.

“This is still my business.”

“Sorry, Miss Waters, but it stopped being your business when they tried to kill you. Now it’s... my business.”

“Can’t it be our business? I’m interested in the boy. Your focus is the woman.”

“The boy is an accessory.” The marshal rubbed his eyes. “Once I get to the bottom...” he leaned back in his seat. His mouth semi-opened to continue, yet no intelligible sounds came out. A moment later, he had completely dozed off, as had his deputy.

Car, brakes, Dallion ordered.

Almost unprovoked, the car came to a sudden halt. The seatbelts were the only thing that kept the two men from slamming into the windscreen. Both Atol and Dallion barely budged.

“That was extreme,” Dallion said with a yawn.

“I knew you’d handle it.” The woman replied unapologetically. Waiting for a few seconds, she opened the car door and went outside.

Dallion waited for a few seconds more, then joined her.

“How long will that hold?”

“Ten minutes, maybe fifteen. Skills don’t have the same effect as they do back there.”

That was an understatement. Dallion’s current splitting ability was one percent of what it had been before. Still, there was no denying that he was adapting rather fast. Once the initial barrier had been broken and he had regained the ability, he was using it as efficiently as before, including force splitting.

Whoever had described the building as a ranch probably had a vast imagination. The house looked as if it was about to collapse at any moment. At some point in the past, there might have been horses or other animals, but now only a partial wooden fence remained.

“Stop,” Dallion said. “Might be an illusion.”

“You think she has magic?”

Dallion kept on looking, trying to peer through the top level of illusion. If there was one, he had no way of seeing what was beneath it. The chances of his target having magic were negligible, but not zero. Atol had specifically said that only mages and domain rulers could remember their experiences from the awakened world.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “She didn’t use it when we met. Still, it doesn’t take much to create an illusion. As long as you can control magic, you can draw symbols on anything.

The two went towards the building. Twenty feet off, Dallion used his combat splitting. There was no way that an awakened wouldn’t have noticed them until now.

“You better do the talking,” he whispered to Atol.

The woman nodded.

“We know you’re there,” she said in a loud voice. The number of music strands were impressive. Sadly, they were general, not targeting anything specific. “We can fight if you want to, but we’re not here for that. We know that one of you has been there.” She paused.

There didn’t seem to be any response.

“We just want to talk about it. There aren’t many who remember the time back there, so—”

In one reality, a crossbow bolt struck Atol in the chest. It was a clean shot, coming from one of the open windows, one might assume. Of course, Dallion had no intention of letting that be. Without hesitation, he switched to his other instance, in which he was the target.

Unlike Atol, however, his reaction speed was a lot faster, causing the bolt to miss by a hair.

“Down!” he shoved her to the side, then darted forward.

As expected, the second shot that followed targeted him specifically. That, too, missed.

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Multi-attack, Dallion thought. It had to be. There was no other way for someone to reload as fast. That made things trickier, but it also gave Dallion an advantage... provided he completed a guard sequence.

Bolt after bolt split the air, less than a second apart. Each time Dallion avoided an attack, he was one step closer to getting the benefits of the guard skills. The question was whether they would actually materialize. Four attacks later, he found out.

Time slowing down on Earth wasn't like what it was in the awakened world. Rather, Dallion felt like a sudden boost of adrenaline that made everything a lot slower and clearer. It also made him a lot more reckless. Right now, he felt as if he could jump through the second-floor window and face his attacker directly. The centuries of experience acquired in the awakened world kept him from doing so. In the back of his mind, he could almost hear Adzorg, Harp, and even Vihrogon criticizing him for merely having the thought.

Reaching the base of the wall, Dallion looked back. Atol was sprinting towards the marshal's car in zig-zag fashion. Chances were that the awakened in the building were more concerned with Dallion than anyone else, but still, it was better not to take the risk.

At least two, Dallion told himself. What complicated things was that he wanted both of them alive. By the looks of it, the awakened within the building didn't share his concerns.

The safe way would be to run round and kick in the door to get inside. That was the reason that Dallion split into three instances and leapt through the nearest first-floor window with two of them. After everything he had been through, it was surprisingly easy. Hands in front of his face, he rolled over on his elbows, then jumped back up again.

Initially, the room was empty, but that didn't last for long. The woman quickly emerged at the doorway, throwing a dagger right into one of Dallion's instances.

"Stop!" Dallion made another attempt to use his music skills.

The effect was questionable, but it did manage to distract her for a fraction of a second—just long enough for him to leap forward with a kick.

In his mind, the attack missed, causing Dallion to start thinking about follow-ups and close quarter strategies. In the real world, it made contact shoving the woman back. Not only that, but the attack must have been stronger than Dallion expected, for it slammed her into the corridor wall.

"Mom!" someone yelled.

Dallion didn't think about it. Refusing to lose the initiative, he pressed on, landing a series of punches in the woman's abdomen.

Each hit, making her no different than a punching bag. If she hadn't attacked with the intention to kill, Dallion would have almost felt sorry for her. As a matter of fact, he did so now, yet he was



smart enough to know not to stop. Once he incapacitated her, things could be different, but until then—

A gunshot sounded.

Dallion immediately split, looking in both directions of the corridor. He expected for the teen to be armed. While the boy was there, standing at the base of a wooden staircase, he wasn't the actual culprit. The person holding the weapon was standing on the other side of the corridor and was none other than the deputy marshal.

"That's enough," the man said, pointing the gun at Dallion. "Kul, get some drinks and go to the living room. We'll be with you in a bit."

Dallion could sense the anger and fear emanating from the boy. Even so, he quietly stepped into the corridor, disappearing into another section of the house.

"Don't try anything, dear," the deputy said. "You won't win against him."

Raising his hands, Dallion took a step back.

"You were the one leaking information," Dallion said. "That's why Atol could never find him."

"Have you ever had kids?" Jimmy asked. "There, I mean."

Dallion shook his head.

"They're the most magnificent thing in the world, even when they're a pain in the ass."

"How come I didn't sense you?" None of the guardians Dallion had spoken to had identified the deputy as an awakened. Was that by design, though? Back at the marshal's office, the incident with the teen had prevented Dallion from making further inquiries. Come to think of it, it was rather convenient that the marshal had insisted on using their car.

"You're not the only one who can talk to guardians," the man said.

Focusing to the extreme, Dallion split into four instances. Three of them charged at the deputy marshal in different fashion, while one remained in place. Before either of them could make their second step, reality was forced onto Dallion, causing all three of the attacking instances to fade away.

"I know everything you'll do," the other said. "You have a lot of potential. It'll be a waste if you lose it all now. In the end, it won't get you closer to your goal."

"What do you know about my goal?" Dallion paused. "Is Atol alright?"

"Asleep in the car with Matt. Like all newbies, she didn't expect that anyone could have music skills and not use them."

With a few groans, the woman on the ground slowly stood up. Anyone could see the glaring anger in her eyes, yet instead of attacking, she gave the deputy a brief look, then walked past Dallion as if he didn't exist.

"I'll get some cookies," she said, still holding her stomach.

Jimmy didn't blink, calmly keeping his weapon on Dallion. As things stood, there was a realistic chance for Dallion to escape, if he wanted to. Was there a point, though? He was the one who had come for answers. Giving up would mean he had gone through all this for nothing. Then again, that was preferable to getting killed.

"I won't kill you," the deputy said, as if sensing Dallion's thoughts. "I just don't want you to harm me, either."

"You think I can?" Dallion smirked.

"You're like a kitten. You still need time to learn how to retract your claws. Oh, you never killed anyone, but you were close. You put my wife in the hospital over a dozen times and even broke my arm a few."

"You have clairvoyance," Dallion concluded. "Is this what you look like, Simon?"

"No, I'm not Simon," the other replied, as if he was expecting the question. "But I'm able to see a few days into the future. As an architect, I thought you'd be able to do the same."

"You've the architect?" Dallion felt a chill pass through him.

He had speculated that there was a chance he might stumble upon Simon, even if it was low. However, he had never imagined he'd come face to face with the previous architect—the creator of the eternal city, Aether, and the greatest age of the awakened world. The man definitely wasn't anything like what Dallion expected. At the same time, he had made his way to the final awakening gate without additional help, or so the Moons implied.

"And so are you. Either that or the Moons really liked you to grant you a boon."

"Felygn did. I was his follower."

"Felygn." Jimmy nodded. "He's always been too emotional for his own good. How's Galatea? Hopefully mellowed out a bit?"

"I..." Dallion thought about it. "I've no idea. He didn't seem like it."

In response, the deputy only sighed.

"So, what do we do now?" Dallion asked, his eyes still on the gun.

"Now—" the man holstered his weapon "—we wait for your friend to come to and have the talk you so desperately wanted."