

Leveling up 981

Chapter 981: An Alliance of Mages

“I always knew that you’d kill me.” Alien stood still, his hand on his face. “Never thought you’d be stupid to do it by accident.”

Meanwhile, Dallion was testing the limits of his current spellcraft skill. It was tempting to cast a pearl of destruction, although there was a strong possibility that the Blue Moon wouldn’t appreciate that. While Astreza hadn’t once meddled in Dallion’s life—or anyone else’s, for that matter—since his return to Earth, that didn’t mean one had to be reckless.

“Is Katka still good in combat magic?” Dallion asked.

“Good enough. That’s why she moved in. She’s worth crap without electricity, though.”

And the generator location didn’t make things easy, Dallion thought. “What about the other mages?”

“One’s hiding in a library somewhere and doesn’t want anything to do with me. The others are worth crap.”

The last sounded doubtful. Alien’s voice had shifted, making it clear they were likely more skilled than he was. Even so, the argument was purely theoretical. There was no possible way they could get here in the next ten minutes, let alone sooner.

I really messed up this time, Dallion thought.

Back in the awakened world, Adzorg and many others would constantly warn him not to let down his guard. The saying was that the moment an awakened lowered his guard, they got him. It was almost comical how quickly he had forgotten than after returning to his home world. It was overconfidence to a large part. Being a world conqueror, and later the architect, had made him think he was untouchable. How wrong could one get... and caught in a web of music, of all things.

“So, what’s the plan?” Alien asked.

“Can you fly?”

There was a long moment of silence. Grains of doubts and hope appeared within the mage’s body, visible plainly within the awakened realm. He doubted there was a deep meaning in Dallion’s words, but was desperately hoping for it to be true nonetheless.

“Plains,” Dallion clarified. “Can you fly planes?”

“Why would I be able to fly planes?” Alien sounded confused.

“Weren’t you a gamer?”

“I fly flight sims, but that’s hardly...” the man’s words trailed off. “You’re not serious.”

“Can you think of anything better?”

Dallion's plan verged on insanity, and that was precisely why he felt confident no one had taken any measures against it. Using the car was out of the question. For one thing, getting to it proved difficult. For another, Dallion had no intention of trusting anything that came from Atol. Using his instances, he had already checked all of his current clothes and belongings. No red flags had been spotted, yet that wasn't a guarantee.

"I can't get it out," Alien said. His fingers moved, casting a spell to summon a large office chair next to him. "We'll have to wait for the power to get restored."

"Not impossible."

Atol was likely going to pick up on Dallion's change of behavior. The music threat she had attached to him remained useless in the awakening realms, but upon his return, she'd notice its absence. That would put her on guard and—if the organization was as powerful as Alien suggested—force her to call for assistance.

The area would be swarming with operatives soon enough. On the positive side, there was a good chance that would keep them from taking any action until reinforcements arrived. Atol knew he was an Architect and just how many he had re-learned. That would be more than enough to make her overly cautious in the situation, making her just right for the perfect push.

"So, think you can fly?" Dallion asked again.

"I'll manage. Not sure we'll get very far with all the gas we have."

"We just need to get in the air. After that, it'll be easy."

The way Dallion spoke, one would think that he had it all figured out. In truth, there were enough loose ends to make a cat choke. The last time he had been so sure about something reckless was back when he had charged the chainling with Gloria and Veil. All of them were single digit awakened, relying on the magic of a copyette they believed to be a low-level cleric. This time, Dallion had the magic, but his plan was just as insane, if not more.

"Why don't you control it?" Alien asked.

"Flight sims aren't my thing. I'm more into MMOs."

"Of course you are." A dry laugh appeared on the mage's face.

Normally, this would be the moment when he'd respond with a smirk and sarcastic comment. To Dallion's surprise, the man cast another spell, creating a martini glass in his hand.

"If we're doing this, I might as well enjoy the last few minutes before we go on the run." He took a sip. "What will Katka do?"

"You'll fly, I'll navigate, she'll maintain the illusion."

"Bad call. She's crap at that."

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

“You’ll fly and maintain the illusion,” Dallion said. “I’ll navigate, and she’ll keep anything from getting close.”

“Better. If we get my shotgun, she could—” Seeing Dallion’s warning glance, the mage stopped. “Just a thought. Won’t make much of a difference. Things are already as bad as they can get. Even if we kill a few of them on the way...”

Dark math. That’s what the hunters called it—the realization that taking a few lives would only slightly tip the scales one way or another. Many wouldn’t have hesitated. Most didn’t. They didn’t have the empathy trait, though. The boon that Felygn had given him was different from the one Dallion had in the past—it was a lot more potent. Given everything Earth laced, it had to be, yet that only made his inner conflicts greater.

“No killing,” he said.

“It might not be our choice.” Alien’s expression hardened.

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t get to that. You just be ready to go.”

“I’ll do my part.” Alien finished his drink then tossed the glass into the air. The object quickly lost shape, vanishing into a cloud of fading purple particles. “You worry about everything else.”

Dallion nodded.

“Just one more thing. Got any clothes I could borrow?”

“What?”

“I can’t risk carrying echoes.”

“What the hell.” The mage shrugged. “Might be amusing. Wardrobe, second floor.”

“Got it.” Dallion rubbed his hands. “Ready? Or do you want another drink?”

Alien snapped his fingers.

In fragments of a second, the realm around Dallion collapsed into a single dot, ejecting him back into the real world. The experience was slower and more violent than he had experienced in the past. No wonder the mage referred to it as a “rake realm.”

A jolt of lighting shot out from the socket next to Alien. The mage lazily grabbed hold of it, then drew a pattern with his fingers. The outlines of an illusion took shape. Dallion could almost admire the skill with which the former archmage wove a fabric that could change reality. As he did, the generator rippled, halving in size. A moment later, it was no larger than the basic desktop PC.

It was a hasty job. Dallion could see the threads fluctuating, distorting the shape between blinks of the eye.

“Can you keep it stable enough?” he asked, cautiously.

“It’s your plan.” The other snapped. Back in the real world, he seemed nowhere as elegant and confident as he had in the realm. “I’ll make it hold. For ten minutes. At least. Maybe even twenty.”

“Ten’s fine,” Dallion lied. He would have preferred an hour, but he was forced to work with what he could get.

“You carry the tanks.” Alien took the generator beneath his shoulder and left the basement.

Sure, he said to himself. Leave the one with the body trait to do the hard work.

Carrying the gas needed to keep the generator running proved more uncomfortable than heavy. Even with Dallion’s best efforts, he could only carry four at a time. Given the short amount of time Alien could maintain the illusion—according to his own words—there was no need to take any more than that. Suppressing a grumble, Dallion climbed the stairs, making all the way to the room on the second floor.

“Nice to see you back,” Katka said as Alien and Dal entered the room.

Get ready. Alien drew in the air with a bit of electricity from the generator.

“I need some new clothes,” he said, keeping a safe distance from the window.

“I’ll join you,” Dallion said. “After I make a call.”

He grabbed his phone and called Atol again. This time the woman replied on the very first ring.

“Shithead!” the woman blasted as a greeting. In the process, dozens of minuscule music strands emerged from the device. Most of them bounced off Dallion without any effect, but a few of the more stubborn ones clinged on.

That had to be how she was keeping an eye on him. Up to a moment ago, he wouldn’t even have noticed them, proud of his ability to snap the obvious larger attacks. Re-acquiring the ability to cast spells had also developed his senses, though.

“Are you ready to go?” Dallion asked, taking the verbal initiative.

“Go? I’ve been wanting to leave this crapper ever since we got here. What’s the rush to leave now?”

“I can find another one,” Dallion lied. His tone was so steady that no one could possibly suspect. “A bit one.”

“What do you mean by big?” Atol’s music attacks visibly diminished.

Got you, didn’t I? “An entire Academy faction,” Dallion said. “Alien definitely fell from grace after arriving here. He’s been trying to crawl into the organization ever since.”

“Wait! An organization of mages?”

“Seems like. He’ll need the power to get back up to show me.”

There was a momentary pause. The complete lack of sound made it clear that the woman had muted her end. Possibly, she was even discussing it with one of her superiors.

“Being in a mage house when the power comes back is a bad idea,” she said after a while.

“It’s a risk I need to take. I’m faster than him, so I can deal with anything he pulls as long as I’m close. How soon can you get things running?”

“I can’t convince the world of everything,” Atol grumbled. “People are on the way, but it’ll be a while until—”

Annoyance and fear vibrated in her voice. For once, the new information had caught her off guard, making it the perfect moment for Dallion to strike.

“Get it done.” He mixed magic with music skills.

The threads were half as large as Atol had used, made entirely out of magic. There was no way she could have protection from that. The lack of combat response made it clear he’d succeeded. If he were greedy, he could try to get her to do a few more things—reveal the rest of her organization, for example. However, Dallion had learned since long ago that nothing good came out of being greedy. Immediately ceasing his attack, he waited.

“Fine! I’ll do my best! Don’t expect any miracles.” She ended the call.

Looking at it, Dallion smiled, then tossed it on the floor.

Sorry, he thought. He was going to miss the guardian, but it was safer this way.

A few seconds later, a black shirt flew in his direction. Not blinking an eye, Dallion caught it midair.

“AC/DC?” he asked, holding it in front of him.

“Seemed deep at the time.” Alien tossed him a ribbed pair of black jeans. “From my goth period. Only thing I know is clean.”

Thankfully, Dallion’s senses confirmed the suspicion. The fabric felt rather rough, though, soaked with the smell of mothballs. There could be no doubt that the mage was playing a joke at his expense. That said, he seemed committed.

“Just so you know.” Dallion put the new set of clothes on the nearest chair and took off his shirt. “I didn’t come here to hurt you, but if you betray me, I will.” His voice rang with icy determination.

As if to stress the point, the back of the chair he’d touched developed a massive crack running down the whole of the wooden surface.

“Don’t worry.” Despite the fear emanating from him, Alien maintained a façade of calm. “I know what it’s like to work for someone overwhelming.”

Chapter 982: Magic from Above

Restoring power after even a minor disaster usually took hours—more during particularly entangled arguments regarding jurisdiction and responsibility. Watching the problem be resolved in twenty minutes was beyond miraculous. Many of the local residents couldn't believe their luck. Dallion, on the other hand, knew the simple truth: where someone with enough power and means wanted something done, it got done.

Lights went back up in the houses of the area, often accompanied by the sound of turned-on televisions, radios, or, in one instance, a cooking utensil that had resumed its original function. In Alien's house, things proceeded somewhat differently. The holes in the ground quickly vanished, covered in lush grass. A large wall surrounded the mansion. Several people glanced at it, yet before they could make any comment, the illusion had taken effect, convincing their minds that the wall had always been there. One or two people kept on looking a bit longer, trying to cling to their original thought, before returning to the more bureaucratic matters of the day. Only the people in the know were aware of what had taken place, but acted oblivious.

Inside the building, things were weirder still. As electricity went through the many shapes on the walls and ceilings, the rooms themselves changed. The small, sloppy room Dallion and the two mages had been in a moment ago suddenly stretched, increasing its size tenfold. Expensive paintings and statues covered the walls, fit for an emperor's throne room. Looking closely, Dallion could recognize four or five masterworks that were identical to what he had seen in the imperial palace back in the other world.

You've kept your taste for luxuries, he thought, even if it was a bit too much for his liking.

The ceiling stretched up, rising by a dozen feet. The windows tripled in size, allowing bright rays of sunlight to flow through, even if the real sun outside was shining from a completely different direction.

"That's it," Dallion said. "Make the plane," he told Alien. "I'll stretch the windows."

As the two set to working, Katka went to one of the statues then, after a quick spell, took a plastic bag full of money from it. It seemed that even in a world of illusionary magic, people relied on hard currency. Hiding it in an illusion was a rather nice touch guaranteeing that no one else would find it.

"Don't break anything, Nox," Dallion whispered as he concentrated on the magic thread pattern near the window.

It was a bit more complicated than the average illusion; thankfully, Alien hadn't bothered adding too many safeguards. Thanks to his combat splitting, Dallion used two of his instances to ask for instructions, fading them out of existence whenever they made a serious mistake.

Soon enough, the window opening grew to the point that it filled the entire wall, some fifty by twenty feet.

Meanwhile, Alien focused on his illusion. Unlike Dallion's, it was a lot more complex, requiring a whole lot of things to work properly. The good thing was—as Dallion had seen—that the physical appearance of the generator didn't matter. All it had to do was provide a source of electricity for the subsequent illusion to function. As such, the plane didn't need to have nearly as many elements

correct. Its weight could be decreased, its “engine” could be given a lot more power than it was physically capable of. It was the body that caused the greatest problem. In the awakened world, magic made the laws of nature mere suggestions. Here, spells got a lot of pushback.

“If you have any schematics online, I can help,” Dallion suggested. “I have scholar skills.”

“Both of us have scholar skills,” the man snapped. “Think we would have survived if we didn’t?”

“We made a few quick millions early on,” Katka explained. Unlike Dallion, she viewed Alien’s work with the same level of disappointment and silent mockery she’d view anyone painting strategy miniatures. “That was before the org gave us a warning. Don’t cause ripples or we step in.”

Not the most ominous warning, but it did the job. Dallion could imagine a lot of people pausing after getting that. He, personally, would only have started digging further. Maybe that was the difference between mages and domain rulers? Mages were a lot more susceptible to threats, while domain rulers had to be kept in the dark and constantly monitored.

What will you do about a mage who is a domain ruler, then? He wondered.

After another half minute, and the generator going through a large variety of shapes, the single engine plane was complete. It could be called impressive—plastic-perfect in appearance and barely capable of holding three people. Considering that it remained a generator, it was beyond words.

“It’s definitely something,” Dallion had to admit.

“It helps if you have ten years to practice,” Alien said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Having a plane fly out of a window was one of those emblematic moments that everyone pictured clearly in their mind until the moment it actually happened.

The window of the building shattered, sprinkling fragments of glass in all directions. Scores of people gasped as something way too big to fit in the room, let alone pass through the window, flew above them, heading into the sky. Dallion could feel the confusion as even the awakened conscious minds rejected the notion. Having no memory of the awakened world made it impossible for them to visualize the real power of an Academy mage. Even now, weakened and lacking resources, they defied imagination.

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COMBAT INITIATED

A purple rectangle flickered within the airplane’s illusion. It lasted a fragment of a second, though was seen by all.

“Careful!” Dallion split into three instances. Two of them turned to either side, trying to see the invisible attacker.

Moments later, a ray of green light emerged, shining through the window straight at Alien’s head.

“Duck!” Combining all his skills, Dallion shuffled, reaching with his hand in front of the mage’s head.

The glass shattered as a bullet made it through, striking Dallion’s palm. The pain was greater than anything he remembered from the awakened world. Shattered by Nox, bullet fragments dispersed through his skin, burning like living embers.

Stop them, Dallion ordered his minions.

His heightened senses could feel the fragments splintering more and more, slowing down in the process. The piercing pain turned into searing as dust pushed through flesh and bone. His minions’ efforts proved incapable of completely stopping the attack. Alien’s head swung back.

Sheer terror passed through Dallion’s mind. This was the first time he had witnessed such a death. One single invisible bullet had put an abrupt end to his plan and nothing he or Alien could do had—

“Damn it!” Alien hissed, his fingers moving wildly, weaving a new spell pattern. Within moments, a solid piece of steel covered the front window.

Simultaneously, Katka reached into her pocket and threw a handful of bullets out of the window. Tiny purple symbols covered the metal bodies, causing them to scatter and boost in all directions like homing missiles. Dallion was able to see them turn through the air moments before another sheet of steel blocked his view.

Two more shots fired, causing large dents on the protective sheets, but thankfully nothing more.

“Where did those come from?” Dallion asked, trying to see through the threads of illusion. While the spells were less powerful than in the other world, so were his magic abilities.

“I told you we’ve always got someone on us,” Alien grumbled. “Did you get him?”

“Don’t know.” Katka replied from behind Dallion. “Discouraged, hopefully.”

The attack was an unexpected element Dallion hadn’t foreseen. It only strengthened his resolve. There was no point in hesitating anymore. He had peeled off the layer of deception, so now his only option was to go all out. No delays, no “normalcy.” Either he’d find a way back to the other world or die.

The pain in Dallion’s hand abruptly decreased, replaced by an itchy-burning sensation. Looking at it, he could see a number of deep wounds, but at least his hand was whole. Looking closely, he could see the magic threads link together as Lux was no doubt working on overdrive.

When he wiped off the blood on his shirt, the wounds were smaller still.

“Are you alright?” Dallion asked.

“Barriers aren’t what they used to be,” Alien grumbled. “It hurts like shit.”

Reaching out, Dallion placed his other hand on the man’s head.

“What the—?”

“Lux,” he said.

There was a low purple glow, one that only a mage could see. Once it was gone, Dallion removed his hand.

“What the heck are you?” the mage asked in awe.

“It’s Lux,” Dallion explained.

“He’s not supposed to exist here.” There was another pause. “You really weren’t lying about your companions.”

“Just as I wasn’t lying that I want to go back. Can you see?”

“Through that?” Alien pointed at the layer of steel in front of him. “Partial illusion. I’m seeing through it just fine. Despite everything else, the old man managed to teach me a thing or two about illusions.” A faint smile emerged on his face. “So, where to, navigator? We have five minutes left of fuel before all this changes back to what it was.”

“Head for the powerlines,” Dallion said without hesitation. “Then start getting your power from there.”

“Clever bastard,” Katka laughed from behind. “Contactless illusions. You haven’t lost your touch.”

Alien didn’t laugh, though did as instructed. A minute later, the speculative hypothesis had been proven. As Dallion suspected, it wasn’t just electricity that provided magic, but also the fields surrounding it. Based on that logic, he could probably manage to extract a bit of power from a magnet.

Once the plane changed its power source and remained flying, Alien quickly changed the illusion to make it a bit less conspicuous. Turning it invisible, although very practical, was out of the question, so the second best option had to do: a flock of birds. Anyone who saw it would find it curious or amusing for a moment or two; they might even snap a picture, but when it came down to it, the incident would soon be forgotten.

Half an hour later, when the group felt relatively assured that the organization wasn’t on their back, it was time to make the first real decision.

“Now what?” Alien turned back. “I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t know where the other mages are. All of us took precautions.”

“Managed to find any other awakened? Simon? Jeremy?”

“The emperor believed that Simon was from somewhere in Europe. Besides, I’m not going to either of them even if I knew where they were! One lifetime was enough.”

Dallion could appreciate the point. In all honesty, Alien hadn't been his first choice to ask for help either. Ironical that it was thanks to him that Atol's veil of deception had been torn off.

"You said you could find others, though?"

"If they're close enough, sure. I'll need to reach through the local grid, but it's possible. There's no telling who I come across. Might be the real thing, might be one of the amnesiacs, or someone else."

"You'll have to teach me that. Before that, I need to go back to college."

"Are you an idiot? People want to kill us and you're worried about your exams?"

"I need to tie up a few loose ends." Hopefully, Atol wouldn't think to search for him there, at least not immediately. "After that, we'll head to DC."

"That's probably where most of them are!"

"Attack is the best form of defense. I want to see what sort of people have conquered the world. Maybe we can come to an understanding."

Chances were that they wouldn't, yet if the past was any indication, they would spend some time playing along. That was precisely what Dallion intended to exploit. If they intended to use him, he planned on using them first.

Chapter 983: The Shadows Left Behind

It was ironic that flying back to his dorm took Dallion longer than it would have had he driven. The main reason was that the plane relied on power cables to move about, making traveling along a straight line impossible. Initially, Alien tended to take a slightly roundabout approach out of fear that the organization might suspect what they were doing. He was quickly dissuaded, though. As Dallion had explained, any organization that powerful could simply pinpoint his location based on the energy drain from the power cables.

The final stretch was done on what was left of the gathered gas. Everyone agreed that there would be an opportunity to get a lot more on campus.

Dallion's intention was to let Katka do that while he placed a limiting echo within all the people that knew him well. As far as the world would be concerned, he had dropped out and gone off somewhere, possibly home. Using echoes in such fashion was the last thing he wanted, but it was better than any alternative.

As for Alien, given how sketchy the man looked outside of an awakened realm, Dallion decided to take him along. At least that way he could calm matters using his music skills.

"We start with my roommate," Dallion whispered as he made his way into the building.

Alien was adamant that he had "fixed" the cameras so there was nothing to worry about, yet that didn't prevent people from spotting them and calling campus security. Given that they had arrived late at night—out of necessity, rather than caution.

“If we’re lucky, he’ll be drunk. If he isn’t. Don’t engage him. He has a tendency to talk a lot.”

Emotions of annoyance kept on emanating from the mage, but he only nodded. When it came to awakened, he had a very good sense of preservation. Right now, Dallion had become the replacement of the Tamin Emperor, who was to be obeyed at all costs. One could almost pity Alien—awakening as a mage was the worst thing that could have happened to him.

Can you ever get rid of your demons? Dallion sighed internally as he reached to unlock the door. Before he could, it swung open.

“Dude!” his roommate said, almost as if he had been expecting him. “You alive? Been hearing—”

“Not so loud,” Dallion said using his music skill.

Concern and understanding flooded into his roommate who covered his mouth in “oops” fashion, then nodded.

“I thought something had happened to you,” he whispered. “Why the heck would you drop out?”

Drop out? Dallion froze. While that was his cover story, he hadn’t started spreading it yet. As far as anyone knew, he was off to see a distant family member with Atol... at least, that was what she was supposed to have said.

Mentally Dallion clenched his fists. He should have checked everything the woman had done. That way, he’d know what really was going on. Apparently, she didn’t think he’d be coming back. There were two ways to interpret this. Either the organization was going to make him an offer, or they were going to make him an offer he couldn’t refuse. Looking back, there was a non-zero chance that the bullets weren’t meant for Alien, but him.

“Family stuff,” Dallion lied, still using his music skill. And just for good measure, he also split into three instances while doing so. “I just wanted to pass by to pick up a few things.”

“What things? They packed your stuff days a—”

A purple zap struck the roommate, causing him to instantly lose consciousness and stumble backwards into the room.

“Alien?” Dallion hissed in all three instances. “What the heck?!” He grabbed the mage by the collar.

“For your own good,” the mage struggled.

The age difference didn’t make up for the difference in stats. Dallion had the feeling that if he didn’t restrain himself, he would crush the other’s neck.

“He’s a cultist!” Alien added.

“What?” Dallion loosened his grip.

“He’s an awakened.”

Dallion looked at the body on the floor. He hadn’t known his roommate much, but nothing had indicated that he had been awakened, let alone a Star cultist. Then again, nothing had indicated that Atol was setting him up, either.

Concentrating, Dallion focused on the magic threads of his roommate. They were barely present, made all the more difficult to spot because of the world’s limitations. Determined to know, Dallion pushed himself further. A dull sensation of pain emerged in both of his temples. The magic threads became brighter, moving throughout his friend like electric circuits. Then, he saw them—black threads of void. They were a lot smaller, wrapping the other threads like a thin layer of fat.

Damn it! Dallion closed his eyes.

Had this always been the case? For all Dallion knew, the other might have been awakened for years before they met. They hadn’t been in the same time—Dallion knew all human otherworlders. He had to have been born before.

“How long have you known about them?” Dallion turned to the mage.

“I’ve just heard rumors,” Alien lied. From what Dallion could tell, this was the first time he had actually seen one. More than likely he was merely being paranoid that they had to exist. It seemed that he had been right to be concerned.

“Think they’re part of the organization?”

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

“We aren’t,” a female voice said.

At the end of the corridor, a girl stepped out of the darkness. Rather, it was more accurate to say that the darkness slid off her, making her visible.

“Jenna,” Dallion said. With everything that had happened, he had started to suspect that she might be involved as well.

On cue, Alien drew a thread of electricity from the nearest lamp, drawing two three-circle spells. The effect wasn’t apparent, suggesting that they were defensive spells.

“That explains why you were so interested in me early on,” Dallion said. Strangely enough, he felt relieved.

“All that power and still so clueless.” She pursed her lips, then glanced at Alien. “If we fight here, I’ll lose, but you’ll attract enough attention for the watchers to step in. Feel like risking it, or we can talk inside?”

In his mind, Dallion went through variations of the fight. The corridor was wide enough for him to rush past Alien in an attempt to reach her, but even if he sprinted, it was unlikely he’d get to her before she could scream. Also, there was no telling what sort of void skills she had retained. The trick she had just done now, was that just a sort of camouflage skill, or was it the Star’s cocoon of void?

You're bluffing, he told himself.

Star cultists didn't have the conviction to fight to the death. The lower ones were greedy, with no will whatsoever, while the upper echelons would constantly backstab each other in their desire to rise up the ranks to the coveted rank of Star candidate.

"Let's talk," Dallion said.

A burst of anger and confusion erupted from Alien, but the man didn't object.

"After you." Dallion stepped to the side.

There were a few questions he needed to ask.

The room was somewhat different from what Dallion remembered. All his things were gone. The second bed remained unoccupied, though his roommate was effectively using it as a storage dump. Books, games, and boxes covered half of it.

In a show of strength, Alien cast a quick spell that shoved everything on the floor. It was by no means elegant, but indicated he was not to be trifled with. In this case, his appearance was of benefit, for Dallion felt fear emanating from Jenna. He himself, though, chose not to take any obvious action.

Lux, Nox, be on guard, he ordered mentally.

"Any chance he'll wake up?" Dallion asked, as Alien used a slightly less rough spell to move his roommate on to the other bed.

"Not in the next six hours," Alien replied. "Plenty of time to talk."

"Not that much," Jenna said, keeping a brave front. "The watchers know you're here. I'm sure they've already sent people."

"You told them?!" Alien hissed through clenched teeth.

"They've ways of watching all the hotspots. Usually they don't mess with us, but you're different."

"I keep hearing that a lot," Dallion sighed.

"There's something unique about you. It's almost like you never left the world. Almost..." she hesitated. "Almost as if you could be the Architect."

Both Dallion and the mage froze still. By the sound of things, there hardly was a person or guardian in the world who wasn't aware.

"I know you can't be. The Architect can't have void."

It's not me, it's my companions, Dallion thought, yet said nothing.

“When did you awaken?” Dallion asked. Even if pressed for time, he remained curious about the other world.

“Here or there?” Jenna dared to smile. “Here, it was close to a year ago. Near the end of high school. It helped mask the change. Everyone said that I had matured too fast, without knowing how right they were. There...” she shook her head. “There I experienced the fall of the great city, destroyed by the Moons.”

“The Fallen South?” That was unexpected.

“Yes, that’s what they called it. It was supposed to be the city of the future. I remember I felt so lucky living in a fantasy world with human technology. Of course, memory can be selective. The city was less than a fifth of its original population when I was born. There were nearby non-human races, but even humans were more abundant outside than in. I remember feeling surprised how few people cared. Everyone was so focused on the benefits that void-tech provided to bother with anything.”

Dallion had seen fragments of that period, yet he still couldn’t imagine what it must have been like. The devastation caused during the war of conquest must have paled in comparison to the destruction brought down by the Moons themselves.

“Even the end wasn’t terrifying, just sudden,” Jenna added. “I remember looking up in the sky and thinking, boy, the Moons must be pissed.”

“You’re void touched,” Dallion said. She didn’t have platinum blond hair, but there could be no doubt of the fact. The power he had seen could be said to belong to the Star, but it was more appropriate to say that it belonged to the overseers. “Was that why you got to know me?”

“Must it be one thing?” Embarrassment and hurt emanated from her even if her expression didn’t flinch. “I’m a recruiter. It’s my job to bring people into the fold. I wasn’t sure you remembered your past. Most don’t.”

She looked at Dallion’s roommate. If one didn’t know better, one could almost say that he partied too hard.

“Like him?” he asked.

“Very few things are worse than being affected by the void. Void touched, cultists... we all need help.”

“Like void anonymous?” Alien asked as spitefully as he could, earning himself a pair of disapproving glances.

Being who he was, there was no indication he cared in the least. Also, Dallion could see the fingers of his left hand constantly moving. The uninitiated might call him twitching, but the truth was that he was repeating the motions of a spell. Should things take a turn, all he had to do was draw some electricity and cast it in a second.

“It takes decades to get all the void out of someone. Before that, they must be made aware of what’s going on. It’s even trickier if the person doesn’t remember. That’s why the Network was formed.”

“Is that what you call yourselves?” Dallion mused. “It’s suitable.”

“Current and former void touched, seeking out other affected and helping them get rid of it. You can say we perform a service, but we also stick to one another. That’s why the watchers don’t mess with us. If there’s one thing the void is best at it’s hiding.”

Dallion could see that. Even back in the other world, it was exceedingly difficult to catch cultists. It didn’t help that parts of the Order were casting a blind eye. When it came down to it, Dallion himself never suspected that he had been affected until well after becoming a mage.

“So, what will you do now?” He looked Jenna in the eye. “Force me to join for your own good?”

The girl shook her head.

“Why?”

“The void can’t be forced out. The more one tries, the deeper it goes. There have been incidents in the past... it didn’t end well for anyone. We’re just here to offer help. You must decide to accept it.”

There didn’t seem to be any music or magic threads in the girl’s words. Concentrating, he couldn’t see any void strands, either. At the same time, he wasn’t inclined to trust her after everything that had happened. Too many people had managed to deceive him due to his own carelessness.

“I won’t be joining you.” Dallion leaned forward. “I’ll deal with my void on my own. But if you’re offering help, there is something I need a hand with.”

Chapter 984: Attack on Campus

At seven minutes to three in the morning, the power in the entire campus was cut off. The outage was of massive scope, engulfing the whole state and slightly beyond. A few minutes later, unmarked military choppers approached the area. Mixed with the sound of their propeller blades were threads of music urging everyone to fall asleep. The order was more powerful than any drug, instantly making any non-awakened doze off almost on the spot. Those with a bit of resistance, and even awakened, felt a wave of tiredness sweep through them, as if their body suddenly realized it hadn’t slept for days.

Several dozen men leaped off the choppers. All of them were dressed in black clothes made of strengthened combat fabrics. Each one of them, without exception, was an awakened with actual skills. The way they moved left little reason for doubt.

“Attack or athletics,” Dallion whispered, shrouded in Jenna’s void matter. “Maybe guard as well.”

“I don’t like this,” Alien grunted. “Giving up magic is a shit move.”

“It’s not like you have where to pull it from.”

Emergency lights were still present within the buildings, but the energy output of the generators powering them was so insignificant that even a half-decent illusion wouldn’t hold for long. Katka’s bullets were an option, though not against so many enemies at once.

The attacking force assembled in groups of five. Some of them rushed into the dorm buildings, while others took control of the parking lot.

“Someone with experience is leading them,” Dallion said. “Cutting off our means of escape, then heading to get us. They probably have some music skill countermeasures as well.”

“Why do you think that?” Jenna asked.

“Atol knows I have music skills.”

More choppers landed, forming a large perimeter round the entire college campus. Each of them was loaded with dozen-person squads. While awakened, they didn’t seem to have retained any of their skills. For all intents and purposes, they merely had vastly improved speed and strength. Dallion had been worried about their perception capabilities, but by the looks of it, his fears were overblown. If nothing else, they weren’t able to see through a shroud of darkness less than three hundred feet away.

“Is Katka’s group set?” Dallion asked.

“She’ll be there,” Jenna replied. “I’ll make sure.”

“Will you be alright?”

Even without looking, Dallion could feel the emanations of the smile.

“The watchers won’t risk going after me,” the girl avoided the question. “I’m not sure we’ll be able to help you after this, though. The network doesn’t want to start a war, either.”

“I know.”

The drawback of a stalemate was that neither side could go too far. The “watchers” had tipped their hand, inconveniencing the void network. Even so, Dallion couldn’t expect them to openly ally with him. In the best of possible options, it was going to be a temporary alliance—he planned to go back. They didn’t.

As the final two choppers landed, Dallion concentrated on them in search of possible targets. Battle strategy suggested that the most capable troops would be sent to where he was believed to be. No one would waste competent forces in reserve, which meant that those in the back line would be the least capable on the scene. Also, there was a high probability that one of the choppers was for evac only. After half a minute of searching, Dallion was proven right.

The medevac chopper seemed no different from all the rest, with the exception that it carried no combat-oriented people. In fact, the only person who emerged didn’t have combat gear, but a casual

uniform matching the dark green uniform the others had. To some degree, it was ironic that the colors chosen were those of Felygn, although it was more likely to be a coincidence.

“That one,” Dallion whispered.

“It won’t be easy getting there,” Alien added.

“It’s no different than any of the rest. We’ll just take a bit longer getting there.”

A loud bang sounded as a flash of purple light came from Dallion’s former dormitory building. Someone had triggered one of Alien’s magic traps. The spells were more flash and light than anything else—there was only so much someone could do using batteries as a power source. Still, the attackers didn’t know that, and after what had happened in Centennial, none of them were willing to risk it.

Masses of reserves rushed forward, as all attention was focused on the buildings.

“Now,” Dallion whispered and dashed forward.

Jenna and Alien clung close to him, doing their best to keep up. The distance from their hiding spot to the chopper in question was less than half a mile, which made it on the verge of their physical endurance. Even so, they gritted their teeth in an attempt to keep up. Simultaneously, another group of people did the same, sprinting to the same target. Dallion couldn’t see beneath the veil of void, but he didn’t need to—Nox made it clear by clawing the fabric of his shirt in the appropriate direction.

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You really like sharpening your claws, don’t you, buddy? Dallion laughed internally.

While everyone was focused on the far greater commotion over a mile away, Dallion put his skills to use.

There were a total of four people at the chopper: two pilots and two medical staff.

Waiting for the last moment to break out of the shadow, Dallion opened the pilot’s door and hit the person inside on the side of the neck. Startled, the other turned to see what was going on. Since he had taken his comm helmet off, fortunately for Dallion, all he could do to raise the alarm was to shout, which is what he tried to do.

“He’s—” a word managed to leave the man’s lips. Without hesitating, Dallion used his music skills to utter an opposite sound, negating it. After that, he proceeded to knock the man out as well.

In the section behind, Alien slid the door open and cast several bolts of lightning to instantly immobilize the remaining occupants. Done, he dropped two small objects on the chopper floor, which quickly changed into car batteries.

“You’ve done this before?” Jenna asked, more than a bit alarmed.

“Lots,” the man admitted. “Not always to zap people, though. Is everything alright up there?”

“Getting there!” Dallion shouted as he whispered orders to the pilots. After ten seconds, he went through their pockets in search of papers. To little surprise, each of them had a pair of plastic cards of various colors. Unfortunately, all the cards had were photos and a series of numbers. “Damn it!”

Why couldn't it ever be easy?

“We’re running out of time,” Alien urged.

In the distance, the commotion in the dorm room had started to die out. The squads had realized that the whole thing was a distraction and were communicating their findings on all channels. Dallion could hear the reports from the pilot’s headphones.

“Did it work?” Katka appeared near the chopper. She was accompanied by an old man—a linguistics professor at the college—who was shrouding her with his own veil of void. Based on his expression, and the emotions emanating from him, he didn’t approve of what was going on. Clearly, he didn’t have the authority to disobey Jenna’s orders.

“I’m getting there.” Dallion split into four instances as he searched through every section of the cockpit. “Jenna, you guys better go. No need to drag you down.”

As useful as void veils were, that wasn’t going to solve the problem. At best, it would grant him a few days, same as the escape from Centennial, before the watcher organization honed in on him again. If Dallion wanted to achieve his goals, he needed a long-term solution, even if it meant taking an increased number of risks.

The network had already done enough. They had helped him execute his plan as well as given him some rather valuable information. Most of all, they had told him where to look next.

“This is just like fighting the Azures,” Katka said as she joined Alien in the chopper.

“In what way?” the man asked.

“Lots of firepower, and no one knows what they are doing.”

“You forget I helped you win the war,” Dallion replied, going through the sheets of a clipboard.

“That’s not how the emperor saw things,” Alien noted. “He called you the most annoying pawn on the board.”

“Well, he’s not here now.” Dallion pulled out a sheet and tossed it to Alien.

“Let’s just hope you don’t fuck this up. Kat, how many rounds do you have?”

“Over a hundred,” the woman replied. “If it comes down to it, I could probably take out half.”

That sounded a bit like a boast. In any event, Dallion hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

A quarter of an hour later the operation came to an end. Power was restored to the grid, with no one being any wiser. The attempt to find and neutralize Dallion and the two mages had ended in utter failure. Somewhere within the organization, heads were going to roll. A vast amount of manpower and resources had been allocated to this simple task, and there was nothing to show for it. While the generator the group had used to escape had been found masked as a car, there was no sign of the targets. The only thing left behind were a few mage traps and a message warning the organization to back off. Writing analysis suggested that it had been written by Dallion.

Not a single person had been injured during the operation, including civilians. Dallion’s former roommate had been out partying and hadn’t been surprised by the storming of the room. Nonetheless, the Void Network had issued a protest to the organization. In turn, the watchers had accused them of aiding three dangerous non-affiliated and the overall stalemate was restored.

All choppers and military equipment had been flown back to their airfields, at which point any involved personnel had gone through an obligatory debriefing. Reports had been filed, electric grid usage remained constantly monitored, and everyone non-essential was flown back to their offices.

One of the people—a medical specialist, to be exact—was sent to New York. It wasn’t a mage or even someone with an active awakened skill, but his perception was much better than average to the point that he could see what lay beyond standard human perception. With the uneventful mission over, his orders were to return to his official job as head surgeon. What he didn’t know—what no one could suspect—was that he had made the trip with three additional pieces of hand luggage. He couldn’t find a reason why he had packed so heavily for the trip back, and no one checking him at the airport cared. It was only after the final luggage check at JFK Airport that he remembered—he hadn’t taken any hand luggage at all.

Meanwhile, Dallion, Katka, and Alien managed effortlessly to grab a cab in front of the airport and drive into the city.

“Back here again,” Katka said, looking out of the backseat window. “Never thought I’d be coming back here.”

“You’re from here?” Dallion asked.

“No. My aunt is. I used to visit a lot when I was a child. I found it okay, but my parents didn’t like it much.”

“We need to stop at a trash can.” Alien sounded exhausted. “I can’t hold the illusion for much longer.”

“Take us to a cheap hotel with internet,” Dallion told the driver using his music skills. “Dangerous is fine, but it must be clean.”

“Sure,” the man replied as he kept on driving, never having started the meter. “Should be there in forty minutes.”

“Make it an hour and you’ll get a tip.”

The comment was strange, leaving the false impression in the man that he had taken on a couple of tourists. There was no way he could refuse such a deal.

“Sure, sure.” He smiled. “Want to see some of the sights of New York?”

“Yes,” Dallion said. “The more the better.”

The truth was that he wasn’t going to look at anything. What he really wanted during this trip was to take a short nap.

Nox, watch out for me, he said mentally. If anything weird happens, splinter the cab.

Chapter 985: Skill from a Dream

“Each time we talk, you’re in trouble,” Euryale asked, walking through a realm of endless threads. “I’m starting to see a pattern here.”

“If that’s what it takes to see you,” Dallion couldn’t conceal his joy. After all the exhaustion, after the world suddenly turned against him almost on the flip of a hat, a conversation with the gorgon was just what he needed.

The realm of a taxi seat wasn’t the best environment to have any meeting, yet it was better than nothing, and from what he had found, communication with the other world tended to be more likely when he did it from an awakened realm. Maybe it was because of him being an architect, or possibly it was an additional effect of Felygn’s boon. What mattered was that they still took place.

“I’m following a new lead.” He chose not to mention Atol’s betrayal and the organization controlling every aspect of awakenings. “There’s a network of void touched.”

Euryale’s snakes twitched.

“It’s okay. They’re trying to get rid of it. Like an atonement thing.”

“No one here atoned for being a cultist.”

You would know. Before Dallion got involved with the Star, Euryale was already hunting down cultists and chainlings hiding in Nerosal. On several occasions, she had saved him from certain death.

“It’s different here,” he chose not to go into any further explanations. “I’m in a large city now. I’m bound to find someone who knows more on how to get back to you.”

“I’m sure you’re doing everything, but you’ve said that before.” A brief emanation of sadness came from her, then abruptly vanished. Even now, the gorgon excelled in controlling her emotions, even more since Dallion had left the awakened world.

"I know. The principle of attraction still works. It's a big place full of awakened. There's bound to be someone with all their memories intact. And if not, I'll keep on searching."

Euryale smiled.

"How are things there?"

"I went to Giaccia's coronation a few days ago," she said. "She's one of the few that openly accepts having a connection with you. Her court is using it for political reasons, which I don't like, but I expect that's life. Adzorg is doing the same in the name of Diroh."

Hopefully, they don't start fighting about it, Dallion thought.

"The Moon orders have confirmed all the claims. It's not that they can't with me being there"

"No one dares go against the most powerful being in the world..."

"You never were so cynical. But yes, I suppose there's part of that as well."

"What about Vihrogon?" Dallion asked. "And the copyettes."

"Vih is fine. He passes by every month. He's kept his link of loyalty towards you. I suspect Gia has as well, but it's improper for an empress to leave her court just to chat with a gorgon hermit. One time I called her Harp. It almost caused a country-wide scandal."

"Hermit?" Dallion blinked.

"It's as good a description as any. I've refused to become the gorgon empress. Seems there's a new fashion for empires again. Even the colossi have one. Of course, it means different things for different races. Even the hunters have proclaimed me to be their patron."

"Euryale, Patron Moon of Hunters," Dallion chuckled.

"You're one to talk. You should hear the things they call you."

"Hopefully, I will."

Silence formed. Both kept on looking at each other for over a minute, afraid to touch or even move closer. Even after all this time, both of them feared that all this might be a dream. Maybe it was?

The whole scene could just as well be a figment of Dallion's imagination given form due to stress. She herself had said that they only saw each other when something traumatic happened.

"Are you still practicing your forging skills?" The gorgon changed the topic.

"No, I haven't had time to lately."

“Why?”

It was Dallion’s turn to pause. “I can’t remember them,” he admitted. “I can’t remember any of my crafting skills.”

An anvil appeared several steps away, seeming out of place in a world made entirely of fabric.

“I’ll teach you,” the gorgon made her way to the anvil. “Just like I did last time.”

“I don’t think it’ll work. Last time I had the skill, I just didn’t know how to use it. This time...”

“You already have the skill, you’ve just forgotten what it’s about.”

There was a lot that could be argued, but Dallion preferred not to. Seeing her was so rare as it was, there was no point in ruining the experience even a little. He could only imagine what it had to be for her. With time moving a lot faster in the other world, probably a decade had passed between their separation. There was a reason gorgons were highly selective when it came to mates—they were bound to them for life. Dallion was as well.

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Looking at the anvil brought back memories. It was similar to the one he used to have in his personal realm. Of course, it wasn’t the anvil that was the most important, but the hammer. Upon being given the choice, Dallion had chosen the most exotic hammer there was, specializing him in sky silver. One could argue that it wasn’t the best choice, although things had worked out, eventually.

The gorgon reached out into the air, causing a metal hammer to materialize in her hand.

“Here,” she offered it to him. “You’ll need this.”

The moment Dallion took hold of it, he felt a strong jolt pass through his arm.

AVERAGE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 10%

Next thing he knew, he was back in the front of the cab.

“Here we are,” the driver turned to him, almost on cue, speaking with a thick eastern European accent. “Casey’s.”

“Casey’s?” Dallion asked.

“That’s what they call it. The real name is something, something.” He waved his hand. “Mobsters stayed low here. Now everyone stays low here.” He laughed at his own joke.

“Thanks.” Dallion used his music skill. “It’s greatly appreciated.”

“Please. It’s an honor to help.”

With as little fuss as possible, Dallion and the mages left the cab. No money was exchanged. In the mind of the driver, he had been more than fairly compensated and, above all, was determined not to mention a thing about the trip to anyone.

Deep inside, Dallion felt slightly guilty. Then again, there wasn't anything that he could do. None of them had actual money, and any form of electronic payment was a strict no-no.

"Well, it's not the best," Dallion said diplomatically.

Alien and Katka just stared back at him.

"We're mages. We don't care how something looks," Katka quickly explained.

"As long as there's power, Alien can change it into a five-star suite." She smiled.

"If he's feeling lazy."

Meanwhile, the man had gone to the nearest trash container and was discretely tossing in car batteries one after the other. Before the dormitory incident, they had ransacked half of the student parking lot. Nine-tenths of those batteries were now useless, possibly more.

It was at that point that Dallion noticed something new. As long as he concentrated, he could see the defects in the metal trash container—not the surface notches, but the deep structural issues.

Uncertain whether it was his imagination or not, he looked around for the first other metal object and concentrated on it. The result was the same.

Thanks, Eury, he thought. You really did teach me how to forge all over again.

"I don't think you should use music in a place like this," Katka said.

"Why?" Dallion split into instances. "Someone's watching?"

"It's a place where shifty comes to rest. They'd have developed an instinct for such stuff. As the saying goes, they don't have to know how you're cheating. Raising suspicion is enough to cause problems." She reached into her pocket and took out a roll of fifty-dollar bills. "Use this."

"With that much, we could have paid the driver," Dallion said, snatching the roll from her.

"And ruin your fun?" She laughed.

The two waited for Alien to finish getting rid of all his used car batteries, then went into the building. Interestingly enough, the inside was just as Dallion had requested it to be: old, dated, yet kept surprisingly clean. It wasn't like it could get three stars, but then again, it wasn't the sort of place that cared.

"Yeah?" A woman at the reception looked at them as if she were doing them a favor. Unlike most other places, everyone knew that she actually was.

"A room for three," Dallion said, placing the roll of money on the counter.

Naturally, he was also using his music skills to make sure to be treated seriously.

“Right.” The woman grabbed the money with enough speed that one might think she was an awakened. “Anything special?” She unrolled the bills and started counting.

“High speed internet and no disturbances,” Dallion was quick to reply.

“Netflix? Games? Porn?” She tapped a few things on a laptop that seemed surprisingly modern compared to everything else.

“Just internet.”

“Three days retainer.” She placed a few notes back on the counter. “You want more, you’ll have to pay extra.”

“We’ll start with three days.” Dallion took the notes.

Shortly after, a large custom metal key was placed on the counter as well.

“One key. You lose it, you buy a new lock.” The woman said. “Cleaning will be done once you’ve left. You’ll need your own PC to use the net.”

“Fine.” Dallion took the key. The number on it read nineteen.

“Second floor at the end.”

“Thanks.” Dallion took a step away from the counter.

“Anything that happens is not my business. You start causing problems with other guests, then it becomes my business,” the woman shouted behind him.

“You won’t even know we’re here.” Dallion added an abundance of calm in his words. So far, so good.

The room was just as the woman had said: the last door on the second-floor corridor. It definitely wasn’t meant as a three-person room. It had two double beds—with double being on the generous side—a bathroom, a small closet, and an air-conditioner. Three power sockets were visible, and one for internet cable. A quick check revealed that the building didn’t have any wi-fi whatsoever.

“Can you manage anything with this?” Dallion asked as he closed the door and drew the latch.

“I’ve dealt with worse.” Alien went straight for the aircon. “Everyone knows these things are a drain, so no one is surprised when one pulls a bit more.”

A thin thread of electricity emerged from the device. The mage took hold of it, then pulled, as if he were pulling a rope. The thickness of the thread increased. Soon, it was large enough for him to start drawing symbols.

The first thing that Alien did was to summon a few copper wires. He then bent them in the appropriate shape—using magic to connect them when needed—and placed them on the floor, ceiling, and all four walls. Moments later, the entire room doubled in size.

“I’ll take care of the beds later,” the mage replied, going to the internet outlet.

Reaching for it, a new purple thread emerged. This still had some electricity in it, but also something different.

“Optics,” Alien explained. “Took me years to get the hang of it.” His hands and fingers moved, creating a loom of threads in the air itself. “Welcome to the internet.”

“That’s the internet?” Dallion couldn’t hide his astonishment.

Who thought that the mage would be so useful after all? He was crap when it came to fighting and physical abilities. He even wasn’t all that tremendous when it came to most magic spells. But when it came to illusions and, apparently, the internet, he was on another level entirely. Looking at him was almost like watching a cyberpunk movie.

“It’ll take me a while, but I can spot anyone significant in the larger area of the city,” he said.

“You do that. Don’t establish contact yet.” Dallion went to the door and drew back the latch. “I’ll go see someone.”

Chapter 986: Fragment of the Past

There was a saying that big cities were the same everywhere. In many ways that held true, yet comparing a city on Earth to any of the cities in the awakened world was close to impossible. The greatest difference of all was the amount of decay that came with cities. Even with steel and glass, Dallion could see the cracks and wear all over the buildings. Humanity had done a good job of covering them up through one method or another, yet he could feel the imperfections. If this were the other world, every building realm would be full of crackling cities.

On a personal note, what Dallion still had difficulty getting used to was the city’s silence. There was an abundance of voices, of course: people, construction, music, cars honking... yet no guardian chatter. The only time guardians spoke was after he’d speak to them first, and even then, they’d always be surprised at his ability to respond. It quickly became like having the same conversation over and over again.

Nah, haven’t seen anyone like you. The hotdog stand replied, while Dallion was enjoying a free hotdog thanks to the generosity of its owner, and Dallion’s music skills. Would be fun. Max is a good kid, but can’t say much.

“Max” as it turned out, was a man in his thirties who had reluctantly taken over the business from his father. Apparently, even here there were items who outlived their owners by far.

Finishing his hotdog, Dallion continued along the crowded street until he got to a small electronics shop. The place offered specialist equipment, along with the obligatory selection of late-model phones and accessories.

A bell attached to the door rang as Dallion pushed it open, causing the sales clerk to look up.

Lock, Dallion addressed the guardian. Can you please jam for a few minutes? I’d like to have some privacy.

Of course, dearie! The lock obliged, clicking the moment Dallion closed the door shut.

Such a polite boy you are. And you even learned my language. Very much the opposite of those hooligans that keep slamming things all the time.

Thank you, Dallion replied with a smile, then went straight to the store assistant.

“Hi,” he said.

This was the moment of truth. The person on the other side of the counter was someone he had history with. The last time the two met, they had fought to their mutual death. Dallion had won, though, at the price of his own life. It was only thanks to the Purple Moon that he’d cast off death that single time.

Don’t make a scene, Arthurows, Dallion thought.

There was enough electricity in the shop for him to cast any number of single circle spells. Even so, he preferred not to fight against a former star in the middle of New York. As he’d learned the last time, one could lose even if winning the fight.

The Arthurows of Earth was a lot younger than the one Dallion had faced in the awakened world. Not even in his late teens, he was just a high school part-timer, helping out in a shop belonging to his uncle.

“Hi...” Arthurows stared at Dallion intently, as if making up his mind whether to go all out or leave it for later. For almost three full seconds, no one said a word, until the teen finally continued. “Do I know you? You look kind of familiar.”

The reaction could be viewed as a positive, but Dallion didn’t feel so at all. Despite the danger, he was hoping that Arthurows would have memories of the awakened world. As a former Star and someone linked to the void, he was supposed to have kept them. Not only that, the Stars were the only one who had actually managed to transport items from Earth to the awakened world.

When Jenna had mentioned that Arthurows had been approached but refused to join the network, Dallion thought that it was because of his pride. The truth was that he simply didn’t remember his past, yet due to the abysmally large amount of void within him, no one from the network dared press the issue further.

“I just have one of those faces, I guess,” Dallion lied as he forced a smile. “I’m looking for a security camera. Have any of those?”

“Sure.” Arthurows rushed to one of the shelves behind him and took an old cheap-looking box. “I got this brand new. Has a series of ten transmitters. All you need is a phone and some phone batteries and you can see what’s going on twenty-four-seven.”

Dallion looked at the pictures at the back of the box. They looked exceedingly low quality.

“Do they have night vision?” he asked.

“Nah. Those are too expensive. We don’t keep any here, but we can order them, if interested. Want me to order it for you? All in advance, though. We’ve had too many jokers.”

“Not yet. I need to think a bit more.”

“Sure thing. We’re open every day except on Christmas.” Arthurows put the box away. “Are you sure we don’t know each other? You seem familiar somehow. Where did you go to school?”

“I’m not local.” A pity. He would have liked a chat. “Do you have a card? If I decide to order the camera.”

“Oh, right.” The teen reached under the counter, then grabbed a store card and a pen. “I don’t have personal ones, but I’ll give you my name and handle. Send a message if you want me to check anything.”

Dallion waited, then took the card.

“Arthur Rows,” he read. “Thanks, I’ll do that. Take care and don’t let the stress get you.” He used his music skill to nudge the teen into being more responsive. “Mental health is important.”

It wasn’t much, but hopefully that would be enough to make him consider getting in touch with the void network. They’d be able to take it from there.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

I’m done, lock. You can open up now.

My pleasure, dearie. The lock guardian replied. Was a wonderful conversation. I hope you come back soon.

Another time and place, Dallion might have, but not here. He had come to have a talk with Arthurows but saw that the boy had nothing to offer. Hopefully, he’d be able to get most of the void out of him by the time he finished college. For someone of that nature, it wouldn’t be easy or pleasant.

There goes one lead, Dallion thought as he made his way through the street.

He had really hoped that he’d find the answer here. Thankfully, other options remained. As a big city, New York attracted the greatest number of awakened. Although, if Dallion failed to find anyone here, he’d have to return to his original plan and face the watcher organization in DC.

As Dallion was walking aimlessly along, a TV store caught his attention. To be exact, it wasn’t the store that was interesting, but the commercial running on the screens. At first glance, it was one of those cheaply made children’s commercials advertising a new chocolate product. What Dallion couldn’t ignore was that the product advertised had his name.

Splitting into instances, Dallion looked around, ready for combat.

The ad kept going on and on, clearly displaying Dallion's name in an effort to gain his attention. When he came closer, the image changed.

Want to get the best deal? Call NOW!

A product developed by Alien Ltd.

"Alien," Dallion relaxed, yet still kept his instances. That did seem like something Alien would do, unless there was another mage in the city. While most of the mages Dallion had dealings with weren't otherworlders, all members of the Shimmering Circle were.

In any event, the best course of action was for him to get back to the hotel as quickly as possible.

Sprinting there would have been a breeze, but using any awakened skills would have called too much attention. Dallion was fortunate that only a handful of people were capable of combat splitting—and none of the watchers, from what it seemed.

In the end, it took him half an hour to get back. Upon entering the room, he found Alien and Katka there, along with a massive takeout order of pizza and sushi.

"Finally," Alien said. "You've no idea how much energy I had to waste to grab your attention."

Having a mobile phone would have been a lot faster. At the same time, it would have made them easy targets for the watchers.

"I found someone," he said.

"Who?" Dallion asked the obvious question.

"Well... someone."

"He's not sure," Katka clarified as she kept on eating a box of sushi rolls.

"Whoever it is, he severed the connection before we could get a clear view of him. Actually, that's the way we noticed him at all."

"I tried going at it from different angles, but he'd block me at every turn."

"A mage," Dallion noted. "I thought you knew all of them."

"I thought I knew all of them. They usually try to out-clever me with spells and blocks, not sever the entire link."

"So, it's not a mage?"

"Must be. Only mages are able to notice. Heck, even you aren't that good."

That much was true. Dallion needed a lot of time and concentration to reach Alien's level. He suspected that even Katka would be better at it. In a direct spell competition, he was favored to win, yet when it came to the type of grit and net surveillance that the other was capable of, he was miles away.

“Can it be Jeremy?” Dallion asked.

The atmosphere suddenly changed, as unadulterated fear emanated from both Alien and Katka. The thought that the Tamin Emperor might be in the same city as them was only less terrifying than the realization that they had provoked him.

Instantly, the loom of magic threads vanished along with any illusions. The room returned to its standard sorry state, now made all the more terrible by all the takeaway cartons present.

“Shit.” Alien grabbed his head with both hands.

“There’s no guarantee it’s him,” Dallion was quick to say.

“Really? Who else can it be? Someone skilled in magic, fast enough to spot magic surveillance, and sever magic threads the moment they appear. And don’t forget, a large enough threat to keep the watchers at bay. The archbishop was crap at magic, so that leaves just...” He didn’t dare finish the sentence.

A meeting with Jeremy was never in the plans. Dallion had discussed it both with Alien and Jenna. The mage was terrified of the possibility, and Jenna hadn’t even heard of him. Both had sworn that they hadn’t been able to find any indication that the man was of this time period. Clearly, they were wrong. Or were they?

“What if it’s Adzorg’s mentor?” Dallion asked. “He was an otherworlder.”

“The old man’s teacher?” The thought caused Alien to calm down. Ten seconds later, he actually considered the possibility. “Not impossible, but that’s still like replacing one monster with another. I’ve heard the rumors about that maniac. He dragged his disciples to the Fallen South! Even the old man found him harsh.”

There was no denying that. From the memory fragment Dallion had seen, the old man was a bit extreme when it came to certain things. Still, he was a mage interested in Earth tech.

“Where did you see him?” Dallion asked.

“You’re thinking of going? You really are an idiot.”

“My life, my choice.” Dallion’s tone hardened. “Where?”

Alien froze up.

“It’s a construction site,” he said after a while. Pulling some energy from the air-con, he created an aether representation of the local area. “Somewhere there.”

“Alright. Stay low until I get back. If I’m not here by evening, you’re on your own.”

There was nothing more that could be said. As anxious as Dallion was feeling, he was also hopeful. In truth, he preferred if he came upon the emperor. It could be said that the man resembled him more than anyone else. If it wasn’t for Simon, their roles would be reversed right now: Jeremy would have been the Architect, and Dallion would be back in college. There even was a chance that he would have lost all his memories of the awakened world.

The trip to the construction site took fifteen minutes with a cab. Just as before, Dallion didn't pay, and the cab driver felt that he had made a favor to a close friend. To a certain degree, Dallion understood why the watchers had formed. It was easy for awakened to abuse their power.

There were over fifty people present at the site as far as Dallion could see, and that didn't include those in the management trailers. From what Alien had said, all attempts at spying had been interrupted, suggesting it had to be from someone on the scaffolding.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion concentrated on his magic vision. Nothing weird about the people in view jumped out. They were nothing but the average well-developed, non-awakened, doing work that most people preferred to avoid. One had to admit they were pretty good at it, too. The metal construction was close to flawless, which was a plus when constructing ten-story buildings.

Finishing with the top levels, Dallion focused on the people on the ground. All of them seemed pretty normal as well. Had the awakened left the scene? Or was someone just messing with Alien?

Then, Dallion felt it—the unmistakable sensation of someone splitting. Without thinking, he did so as well, leaping in two different directions. As he did, his effort was quickly interrupted, forcing all but one of his instances to fade away.

"It's not polite to split before introducing yourself." A heavy hand slammed onto Dallion's shoulder and briskly turned him around. "Hello, grandson. How have you been?"

Chapter 987: An Awakened Family Dinner

Kraisten, Dallion thought, unable to utter the word. He had expected a lot of things, though not this.

The man was large as a bear. His muscles weren't as defined as those of a bodybuilder, but large, obtained through years of hard labor on construction sites. The face, though, was the same, just a lot younger and cleanly shaven.

"What's the holdup, K.?" one of the other workers shouted. "Time's ticking."

"Family issue, give me a few," Kraisten shouted back as he let go of Dallion's shoulder. "What are you doing here?" he asked in a lower tone.

"That's my question," Dallion countered. Last time he had seen the man, he had been erased from existence. Of course, that had happened in the other world, but being the most extreme Moon's punishment, one would have thought there would be other consequences as well.

"I work here," the large man grunted. "And don't like being spied on."

"You severed the threads?" Dallion was even more shocked than before. "But you never had magic."

"Idiot. Of course I had magic. I told you I was second after the emperor. Just because I got de-leveled doesn't mean I lost it."

"Time's wasting, K." someone else shouted.

"I said, I'll be there!" The man roared, almost causing Dallion's eardrums to rupture. "Look." he took a notepad and a pencil from his back pocket and scribbled something on it. "Go here after work. Come alone and bring some flowers and candy." He tore off a page and handed it to Dallion.

"Flowers and candy?" Dallion looked at the note.

"For the wife. You'll be my distant cousin."

Kraisten patted the boy on the shoulder and went to join the rest of his crew. For close to a minute Dallion just stood at the entrance barrier to the site, staring blankly at the construction. A few more workers passed by him, coming from a quick trip to a nearby shop for cigarettes.

Grandad, Dallion thought.

So, the man had a wife on Earth. It was impossible to know whether he'd had her before having his family in the awakened world, or afterwards. Either way, it couldn't have been easy.

Coming across him, though, also came with its own set of problems. He couldn't tell Alien and Katka about the old man, but at the same time he couldn't say he hadn't found anyone, either. With Alien being paranoid as he was, anything vague would be seen as a serious problem or proof that the watchers had somehow gotten to Dallion.

Ultimately, after a careful analysis of the situation, and a bit of experimenting with combat splitting, Dallion decided to tell them the truth. He also made it clear what would happen to either of the mages, should they fail to keep the secret.

"That's almost as bad as the emperor," Alien said, lying on the bed. Naturally, he had used an illusion to make it twice larger and far more comfortable. "The man was the imperial executioner. Do you know how many otherworlders he killed?"

"You seem to know a lot," Dallion noted. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Ha, good one. Even if there weren't Moon vows involved, I still wouldn't have said a word." He sat up. "You're thinking of going to him?"

"Why not? If he wanted to harm me, he could have done it there, or even here. I've no idea how good his magic skills were, but if he can sense you spying on him, he can probably track you."

"Unlikely." The mage said, yet fear still emanated from him. "I made sure to have a lot of false splits and barriers just for the occasion."

"Sure. Either way, you and Katka don't have anything to worry about. I'll go there on my own."

"And if you're not back till morning, we're on our own," Alien added for him. "I knew you showing up would bring disaster. Before that, I was safely barricaded away. Then you came and look what happened."

“You’re still alive,” Dallion snapped. He was starting to find the constant complaining annoying. “If you’re lucky, he’ll know a way for us to get back.”

“And if not?”

Dallion shook his head.

“That’s why you and Katka will spend the rest of the night searching for other awakened in the city. If there’s no one here, we go to DC.”

“And if there are no answers there?”

“We go through the entire world until we find some!” Dallion shouted.

It was unusual for him to lose his temper. Even he knew it. The outburst had outright terrified the two mages, who were all but trembling right now. Judging by the emotions emanating from them, they might as well have been.

“Sorry,” Dallion was quick to add, even if he wasn’t; not entirely, at least. “I just want to focus on the things we can do. We were brought there, so there is a way. If it involves magic, ancient artifacts, or high-tech devices—all the better. If not, I’ll find a way to plead to the Moons directly, but I’ll find a way back.”

“Sure,” Alien was quick to say.

“One last thing.” Dallion turned to Katka. “What type of flowers are appropriate for dinner?”

Stolen from its original source, this story is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

It was a slightly awkward moment, but an hour later came the most awkward moment of all—Dallion standing in front of his grandfather’s door. It was a working-class house in a working class neighborhood, probably passed down for a generation or two. As much as he was ashamed, Dallion knew very little about Kraisten’s Earth life, and there was no guarantee that the little he knew was true.

The moment he knocked on the door, loud barking came from inside.

Great, Dallion thought. He has a dog.

The sound of rushing steps followed—far too soft and quick to belong to an adult, though not a complete child, either. A moment later, the door opened.

“Yes?” a boy of around ten asked.

Seeing him, almost made Dallion drop the gifts he had brought.

“Lin?” he couldn’t help but say.

The boy was a carbon copy of his brother in the awakened world. The only problem was that not only wasn’t his brother an otherworlder, but he was incapable of awakening. Even at the height of

his power, Dallion wasn't able to change that. Yet, he was standing right there, looking at him in confusion.

"Err, I'm here to see your father," Dallion quickly added. "I'm a friend."

"Jack!" A woman rushed to the door. She was on the plump side, but warm and motherly, with curly golden-brown hair. "I told you we're having guests for dinner."

The boy looked up at his mother, then took a step to the side, still observing Dallion with curiosity.

"Sorry about him. He's at that age. I'm Carla. You're a distant relative of Karry's right?"

"Yeah." Very distant. "Sorry for the intrusion. I didn't expect to be passing through here." He quickly handed her the bouquet of flowers—daffodils. "This is for you."

"Oh, you shouldn't have." The woman smiled and took a whiff.

Dallion had been present at enough dinner parties to know that most of the reactions of people who got flowers weren't genuine. To his astonishment, Carla's were. The woman was actually happy. What was more, she wasn't displaying anything but warm feelings towards him.

"Oh, come in, come in," she invited Dallion into the house. "Karry will be here in a moment. You know what they say—the moment you go to the bathroom is when the guests decide to show up." She laughed, leading Dallion to the dining room.

The interior was modest but well kept. Judging by the pictures on the walls, Kraisten had three children, two of which had left home for college. There were also pictures of Kraisten's wedding, him in military uniform, and posing with a rather impressive fish he'd caught. All in all, the ideal life one could have. No doubt about it, he was a lot luckier here than in the other world.

Barking followed as a German shepherd ran down the wooden staircase, preceding Kraisten's arrival. It was one of those creatures that, despite its size, seemed friendly to anyone, even people it had seen for the first time.

"You're late, Dal," the large man said.

"Nonsense." His wife fluttered by. "Dinner isn't served yet."

"He's still late." The man grumbled. "Want something to drink?"

"I don't..." Dallion began. "Sure."

Kraisten disappeared into the kitchen, then reemerged with two bottles of beer. Flicking his thumb, he opened one and handed it to Dallion. Then he did the same with the other.

"Cheers." He took a large gulp.

"Cheers." Dallion took a sip. The taste was terrible.

“Jack, why don’t you help your mother in the kitchen?” Kraisten asked.

Dallion was able to catch a faint presence of music threads. It wasn’t the actual skill, but something developed through experience.

The boy nodded silently, then disappeared, leaving the two alone in the living room.

“How are things back home?” the large man asked.

“Are you sure we can talk here?” Dallion whispered.

“I invited you for a reason. It’s safer here than anywhere else.” The man took another gulp of his bottle. “Damned place is full of zombies walking around. None of them have any idea what they’ve been through—the good and the bad.”

Dallion nodded.

“So, why are you really here?”

“I want to go back.” Dallion said. “I thought someone here might know how.”

“You never quit while you’re ahead. Did you piss off the network?”

“No.”

“What about the watchers?”

Diplomatically, Dallion took a sip from his deep instead of an answer.

“That’s bad. Don’t underestimate them too much. They’re like ants—persistent and dangerous in large numbers.”

“Did you call me here to tell me what I already know?” Dallion stared right into the man’s eyes. The experience from the other world still made him view his grandfather as someone to be in awe of. Even so, he didn’t intend to let himself be intimidated.

“No.” The other looked back. “I invited you to dinner. We’ll talk about this afterwards.”

Dinner started on the silent side. Most of the food was composed of things that could be readily bought at every store outside. Still, with such a short warning, there was no reason to complain.

Initially, the conversation was centered around Dallion: where he was from, how was he related to Kraisten, what was college life like... Several times he had to resort to combat splitting, not to mess things up. After a while, though, the focus shifted to Kraisten’s family instead.

Dallion got to learn stories about all of their children, details regarding how the old man had proposed to his wife, a few war and hunting stories—all of them exaggerated, of course. By the end of the meal, all the initial anxiety and concern had faded away, making Dallion feel as if he had experienced a standard family meal.

Beyond the obvious differences, he almost felt like he was back in the awakened world again, sharing food with his grandfather and his extended family. Even the awkwardness of looking at a carbon copy of his otherworldly brother stopped bothering him.

The talks continued all the way into the night. Then, after everyone had helped clean the table and Jack had been sent to bed, Kraisten invited Dallion to a beer outside.

“He really looks like him, doesn’t he?” the man asked, opening another bottle of beer with his thumb. “It’s one of those things that you don’t notice right away.”

“Any connection?”

“Cosmic coincidence, pettiness of the Moons?” Kraisten shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

“Which family was first?”

“This one. I had Paul and Emma before I got sent there. Looking back, I wonder how the second childhood didn’t mess me up.”

“You had your local memories to take care of that.” Dallion remembered that while he was confused, he couldn’t say he was panicked. The link to the world had made him part of it, killing the desire to want to return.

“Or maybe the Moons just put an invisible echo in our realms.” Kraisten finished half of the bottle and put it on the front porch. “I know it’s shit to ask, but I’ll ask anyway. How did you die? Did Jeremy kill you?”

“Die?”

“Or did you break a vow?”

“Neither.” Dallion put his full bottle next to Kraisten’s. “I leveled up the world.”

The man stared, pride and disbelief emanating from him like a lighthouse beacon.

“Holy crap.”

Chapter 988: Former Emperor

“Little Alien,” Kraisten shook his head. “Never liked how he clung to Jeremy. Then again, Jeremy had that effect on people. Half of his order were convinced that he was their friend. I was convinced.”

It had taken a couple of hours for Dallion to share everything he’d been through, starting from the day he left for Nerosal. This time there were no restrictions, no Moon vows, and no reason to keep secrets. In many ways, it was like talking about a game the two of them had played at some point. Now that they no longer were “characters,” they could see beyond the scope of the awakened world. One would almost call it liberating if it wasn’t for the remnants that had taken control of this world.

“How many of them do you think there are?” Dallion asked.

“Watchers? Probably thousands in the states alone. Definitely a lot less than a million world-wide. Numbers tend to get messed up when you can’t see everyone in one place. A thousand people might seem like the fucking army.”

The recent campus incident was a perfect example of that. In Dallion’s mind, he had been assaulted by the world and only managed to escape thanks to the underground movement that was the network. When looking at the numbers from a distance, though. He would be surprised if there were two hundred people involved in that raid. As for the network, he’d only seen a total of eight, most of which had only run interference.

“You know why they’re chasing you, right?” the man asked.

“Because I’m the Architect?”

“Because you’re running. Why aren’t they going after me? They know perfectly well where I am.”

Dallion could sense the answer, but said nothing.

“Because I made it clear that I can take out a hundred of them if they try, and am prepared to do it,” Kraisten added. “That’s not your thing, though. You messed up by telling them about Felygn. That tipped their hand and now they can’t back out, not anytime soon, at least. If they do, they’ll seem weak and they can’t afford that.”

“Why? Those that matter already see them as weak. Who are they trying to impress?”

“Themselves.”

Just like an alliance of ants. The individual weakness of their members created the urge for them to appear strong. That meant they’d keep hounding Dallion for a while, or until they caught him.

“I want to help you, Dal, but there isn’t much I could do. Even with two kids here, I never wanted to leave the other world, so I was never interested in the magic portal crap.”

That wasn’t what Dallion wanted to hear. He had doubts that Kraisten would be able to provide any substantial help, but still clung to the hope. Now, that too was gone.

“I’d tell you to find Simon, but that old geezer’s unfindable. Trust me, I’ve tried. Even went on vacation to Europe with my family and still nothing. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has forgotten about everything there and not because of anything the Moons did, but just because he wanted to.”

“Yeah. He did believe that the other world was just a game.”

“That only leaves you with Jeremy, though I’m not certain he’ll know, either.”

“Jeremy?” Dallion jumped up from the porch. “He’s here?”

“Of course he’s here.” Kraisten laughed. “We’ve been exchanging holiday cards every year. Just because he was an asshole there doesn’t mean he’s one here.”

Dallion clenched his fists. As far as he was concerned, that’s exactly what it meant.

“And even if he is, what does it matter? It’s unlikely we’ll ever see each other.”

“Never knew you were so forgiving.”

“Will I be better off if I don’t? The part of me that was in that world is gone, Dal. I still think about them. I’m still happy about the good things, but it’s not here. It’s not real anymore. I’ll admit it, there were days at first when I missed it. But seeing my children here grow and go to college has made a lot of my life there fade away. I’ve tried to hold a grudge, but it’s like staying mad at someone for tearing up my comic book in third grade. There was a time when it was important. Now, it isn’t.”

“You’re wrong.” Yet, even Dallion had to admit that he was the only one urging to go back. No one else seemed to have any inclination, not the Architect, not the network, not even the watchers, or they would have made a deal to use him to achieve it for them. “I want to go back. So does Alien.”

“Alien.” Kraisten shook his head. “You’re mistaking running from for running to. That kid’s got problems. I don’t know what he wants, but I’m sure as hell it isn’t to return to the other world. Give him a month and he’ll be just as miserable there as he is now. And he’ll still be terrified that the watchers, or something, will find a way to get him. I don’t know why, but you’re the only one who really wants to go back.”

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

“If your wife was there, you would as well!” Dallion raised his voice.

Kraisten took one long look at him, without saying a word. A faint glint of anger sparkled in his eyes.

“My wife is there,” he said. “As is my daughter and one of my grandkids. You think I just decided to let them go?”

Dallion had no choice but to look away. As much as he felt right about what he had said, he had taken the wrong approach.

“Maybe it’s different for Architects, but there’s a part of you that’s still there, and I don’t mean your wife. That’s what’s pulling you to leave, just as the otherworlder part of us urged us to grow and explore when we were there.”

So, you’re saying I’m a freak, Dallion thought.

“When you first came to the construction site, I thought you were just in trouble with the watchers, so I invited you to tell you how to handle things. That’s not the problem, though. Looking at you, I can tell you’ll never lead a happy life while you’re here. That little something—” Kraisten tapped his left temple with his index finger “—is urging you to keep going in search of a way back. You can take over this world and you’ll still not be happy.”

There couldn’t be a stronger difference of opinions. And still, the underlying fact was undeniable. Kraisten really didn’t want to return, despite having just as many reasons to do so, maybe more. It was tempting to say that time had brought on that change, time and his responsibilities on Earth. Dallion had only one family, after all. One could consider his parents as a second family, but it was by no means the same.

“Jeremy, eh?” Dallion asked, unwilling to get into an argument that would change no one’s mind. “Alien will be thrilled.”

“Might be a better idea to leave him behind. Just let me know where he is and I’ll take care of him.”

“He’s a wreck,” Dallion said. “And he’s not alone.”

“I can handle it. I wouldn’t be allowed to lead a normal life if I didn’t think so. Besides, us mages have to stick together, right?”

Thinking of his grandfather as a mage stretched the limits of Dallion’s imagination. Technically, he was correct. Like Dallion and the emperor, Kraisten had mastered all twelve skills in the other world. That was before his subsequent de-leveling. Given the limitations of this world, he might even pull off a spell or two.

“Your life, your choice.” Dallion shrugged. “Where do I find Jeremy?”

Instead of answering, the large man stood up and went back into his house. Half a minute later, he came out again and tossed Dallion a fashion magazine. The choice of subject seemed weird, especially since it was male fashion. That was until Dallion got a better look at the cover.

“You gotta be kidding me.”

The all-powerful emperor of the Tamin Emperor was plastered on the front cover, wearing a loose-fitting shirt that no one in their right mind would be caught dead with. A brief description on the side presented him as one of the world’s top male supermodels, and illustrious bachelor, with a promise of more gossip on page nine.

“That’s him?” Dallion’s mind rejected the notion.

“Yep. He’s been doing pretty well for himself. The address is inside, though it won’t be easy to get to. As any celebrity, he has full security and a mansion that’s as safe as a bunker. Pictures are inside. The wife’s been asking for a

similar kitchen. Not sure how we can fit that in this place. The entire house can probably fit in his kitchen.”

“Jeremy the model,” Dallion said out loud, hoping it would sink in. It still didn’t.

“Do you have a way to get me to L.A.?”

“My advice would be to take a private jet. It’s faster and less hassle.”

“Any advice on how to get that?”

“You’re a big boy,” the man snorted. “Figure it out on your own. You’re the Architect, aren’t you?”

That’s only a title, Dallion thought, but nodded.

“One more thing. Remember when I said that events in the other world don’t matter? Don’t entirely count on that when you get to Jeremy. He was pretty bitter the first few years.”

Figures. “I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks for the dinner, Kriasten.” He smiled. “It was... nice.”

“Least I could do for family.” Despite claims of the opposite, a faint claim of longing emanated from the man. “Now, get lost before you wake up the family. I’ll be answering questions about you for weeks.”

With a chuckle and a wave, Dallion left, walking into the night.

It would be a lie if he didn’t find his unique circumstances disturbing. Unlike his former grandfather, though, he viewed it from a completely different angle. Whether or not he had maintained his drive to return or everyone else had lost theirs, was semantics. The really troublesome aspect of it was that the reasons for mass unified behavior were usually linked to the Moons. Of the seven, one Moon still remained on Earth—Astreza. Dallion could see him in the sky even now, though he looked a lot less glamorous without his deep blue glow.

What do you think? Dallion asked the pavement tile he was standing on.

Huh? The tile guardian replied, clueless what was going on.

Yep, what I thought. Dallion nodded and went on. His entire life on Earth felt like a trial with no guaranteed option of success. And to make matters worse, he got to see heroes and villains of the awakened world’s past. All of them to the last one were nothing like he expected them to be. Powerhouses that could affect cities and destroy continents were leading normal ordinary lives as if nothing had changed. Even those who had retained a desire for control—and forgotten everything else, ironically—had chosen to remain stuck here, rather than try and establish a link to the other world.

“Taxi!” Dallion shouted, using his music skills to lure any cab in the neighborhood.

Soon enough two pulled over, rushing to take him as a customer.

“I’ll take him.” Dallion pointed at the better-looking car. “Thanks, though. Appreciate it.”

The competitor waved back, pleased that he’d done Dallion a favor, then drove off, while the one selected opened the front door for him.

“Thanks, man,” he said, genuinely grateful. “Where to?”

“That’s a good question,” Dallion said, more to himself than the driver. “Know where I can get a private jet to L.A.?”

“Wow. You’re not taking things light. I got you, though. I know just the place.”

“Great. Just before that stop by an auto shop. I need to get some car batteries.”

Chapter 989: Spells in a Multi-Million Dollar Mansion

Over a dozen watchers were placed at key spots at the airport. Some of them would blend in while others deliberately attracted attention. Whether they were meant as a deterrent defeated the purpose, for it had quickly provided Dallion with a way to identify everyone else.

All he had to do was split into instances and cast a spell to make everyone else react. At that point, Dallion would quickly fade his more extreme instances and repeat the process until he was certain that he’d caught everyone out. From there, it was only a matter of sneaking by.

The watchers had adapted from their previous mistakes. At this point it was risky gambling on the luggage trick, or attempting to convince any of them to escort Dallion to a private jet. If he were in their place, he’d react to any anomaly, especially those performed by one of their members.

“If you’re there, Gleam, I could really use some help,” Dallion whispered as he stood by a cab stand near the entrance, pretending to be waiting for someone.

Unfortunately, the shardfly didn’t react, cutting off Dallion’s easiest approach. The option of creating the illusion of a fly, or even a bird, was out of the question. A forceful approach wouldn’t work, either. It would be easy creating chaos at the airport, or even a fake scare. Yet, while Dallion could make sure that no one got hurt, he’d gain nothing. The watchers were unlikely to fall for the same trick twice.

What do you think? Dallion asked his hidden familiars. Think I should make myself into a tire?

The option had its lighthearted charm, but was unlikely to work. For ten more minutes, Dallion went through various approaches. Then, finally, everything clicked in place. Common logic suggested that the simplest solution often was the best. Politics in the awakened world had taught Dallion differently. Waiting a bit longer for the perfect victim, he approached a rather well-off couple making their way towards the airport entrance.

“Let me help with that,” he offered, even if the pair didn’t have any luggage.

“Err, why thank you,” the woman was faster to react, while her husband remained in a mild state of confusion.

“You’re the ambassador of Morocco and his wife,” Dallion whispered, using his music skills. “On your way to Los Angeles.”

Immediately, the couple’s attitude changed. An air of authority emanated from them, suggesting to everyone around that they were beyond V.I.P. status.

“And who are you?” the man asked, glancing at Dallion.

“I’m your diplomatic pouch.” Dallion reached into his pocket, where he drained enough energy from several shrunken car batteries, to cast the illusion onto himself. From this moment on, everyone would see a large bag marked diplomatic mail carried by the new “ambassador.”

Skipping the standard queue, the pair went straight to the specialized fast que, where they showed their international passports.

“There’s no need to look closely,” Dallion whispered. “Who will impersonate an ambassador?”

“Your excellency.” The airport employee waved them through. Dallion, of course, followed. After all, the pouch couldn’t be separated from the ambassador.

The screening device didn’t find anything wrong, and neither did all the people checking the boarding pass. It hardly mattered that the couple were heading to the Alps for their holiday. According to everything in existence, they were on a first-class trip to Los Angeles on the very next flight. Their diplomatic and V.I.P. status quickly let them skip all queues and checks, straight to the luxurious section of the airplane. Once inside, Dallion cast another illusion on himself and sat in one of the free seats.

“Hello,” the man nodded with a polite smile. “I’m the Ambassador of Morocco and this is my wife.” He introduced them.

“Charming.” Dallion nodded in turn. “I’m into show business.”

The chitchat ended there as a stewardess approached and offered them champagne. Dallion refused, of course, preferring to go with a soft drink.

Thirty agonizing minutes he sat at the ready should something go wrong. All the time, Nox was ready to cause an entire section of the plane to fall off should Dallion need a quick escape. Then, finally, the plane went onto the runway and into the air.

I hope I never see you again. Dallion looked through the thick glass of the airplane window. He was referring to the watchers, but it could also stand true for the world itself. Sadly, he had to wait a bit longer.

The flight was long and boring, even in first class. Dallion couldn't afford to let his guard down, constantly maintaining the illusion of the car batteries in his pockets. The one thing he did take advantage of was the relatively good first-class internet to read about Jeremy.

The name the Tamin Emperor was known as was Jeremy O'Conner. Clearly fake, it was good enough to grab attention. According to the gossip sites, he had risen into fame three years ago after a swimsuit commercial had gone viral. Since then, he had risen to greater heights, acquiring brand deals with multiple top brands.

Interestingly enough, the greatest topic of discussion was the man's love life. The lack of any stable partners giving rise to all sorts of rumors from him not being into women, to being highly religious and with a large family he kept away from the spotlight. Here and there among the chaff, Dallion was able to find useful nuggets of information. It was claimed that Jeremy had been an avid surfer at some point, though he refused to enter any championship. "Friends" also swore that he was a monster at swimming and beach volleyball. And while all that could be fabricated for his image, Dallion got the impression that the former emperor had retained some of his skills as well. That might pose some issues when they met, though before that there was the problem of getting anywhere near Jeremy's multi-million-dollar mansion.

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The place was in an area of L.A. out of bounds for the normal person. Anyone that got anywhere close would instantly be tagged by the local police and the highly paid security outfit. And that was before he'd have to deal with Jeremy's personal bodyguards.

Things are never easy. Isn't that right, plane?

You said it, the plane replied. They've been promising to retire me for five years. Instead, I get double shifts.

That was the least encouraging thing one could hear from the plane they were on. Fortunately, the flight was near its end.

* * *

Every year, usually on a random holiday, Jeremy would receive a postcard. It would always come from Kraisten, containing a few standard well-wishes and a signature. Occasionally, there would be a longer message covering the picture side, written in magic threads. Only matters regarding the awakened would be discussed there—a new face making itself known, the latest stupidity from the watcher organization, or a throwback to the past.

Each letter sent was carefully preserved and kept in a leather-bound album. It didn't matter so much what was written, but the fact that there was anything written at all.

This time, when a priority courier delivery brought a whole package with the postcard, Jeremy was confused. After getting the supermodel's electronic signature, the courier slid the package through the designated slot by the side of the door and went on his way.

Upon getting the note for inspection, it turned out there was nothing on it—neither address, message, or even a trace of magic.

Putting it to the side, Jeremy opened the package. Its contents were even more confusing than the postcard itself—a purple ball of yarn.

Observing it for several seconds, Jeremy then picked it up. There seemed to be minute traces of magic threads within, though not enough to cast any spell. If this was an attack attempt, it was highly inefficient. If it were a joke, it was of poor taste.

The man was just about to throw it away in the nearest bin when he heard the slight vibrations of a sound. It wasn't a beep, or a tune, but a single continuous tone. The tone went on for two full seconds, when it suddenly intensified.

Suspecting something not to be right, Jeremy let go of the ball of yarn and leaped back. His fingers moved at a frantic speed, drawing electricity from the floor itself to cast a three-circle spell.

As he did, the ball burst open, spreading yarn in all directions, revealing a single tuning fork in its core; the fork was vibrating.

The entire row of oversized windows lost their opacity as they shattered into thousands of pieces, unable to withstand the sound vibrations. Then, Dallion jumped through, still in the courier outfit.

“Jeremy!” he shouted, using his music skills in an attempt to immobilize his opponent, even if for a second.

The attempt was immediately thwarted as an aether sphere surrounded the man, causing any and all sound threads to bounce off. Even now, in this world, the emperor hadn't dulled his reflexes.

Unwilling to give up, Dallion continued forward, striking the aether surface with his fist.

A spiderweb of cracks emerged on the flowing aether, making it shatter almost as fast as the windows.

“Been a while!” Dallion spun in the air, attempting to strike the shoulder of the emperor with an upper sweeping kick.

Jeremy successfully managed to block it again with his left arm, but as he did, a series of bloody scars emerged over his flesh, as if a particularly vicious cat had clawed him.

“Crackling claws?” The man leaped back, mildly surprised. “Guess you learned new tricks after taking over the world.”

Pitch black liquid oozed through Jeremy's pores, covering the entire surface of his arms with a black, plastic-looking layer.

“So have I!” Jeremy used music skills of his own, while also engaging in a physical multi-attack.

Music clashed with music, while the two simultaneously exchanged punches. No one had managed to get any weapon, not that there were any that could give them nearly as big an advantage as the ones back in the awakened world.

No matter how many times Dallion landed a blow, the attack was entirely absorbed by the layer of void. Fortunately, Jeremy didn't seem to be able to fully take advantage of the fact, since he seemed to lack guard skills.

Lux, let's pick it up a notch. Dallion punched the emperor in the chest.

The shirt was instantly shredded thanks to Nox's ability. Then, something different occurred. When Dallion followed up with another punch in the same area, the void pulled to the side, as if he had hit a layer of water.

You still can't stand healing, can you? Dallion grinned.

He would have preferred to use spark point attacks, but one couldn't always have everything in life.

Yet another punch followed, once again scarring Jeremy's chest before the void could seep back in.

"Not bad." The void peeled off Jeremy's left hand, allowing his fingers to pull magic from the floor again.

Noticing it, Dallion pulled away and did the same. Since entering the premises, he had noticed the continuous current running beneath the walls and floorboards. The emperor had gone through a lot of trouble to ensure himself a permanent source of magic. Anyone unsuspecting would probably have been killed within moments without even knowing why. Yet, that only worked on non-mages.

Both sides focused on the most efficient spells they could muster. Jeremy cast a circle that poured aether needles at his enemy, like a high velocity machine gun.

Dallion, on his part, took an entirely different approach, forming a portal. It wasn't guaranteed he'd succeed, but if he did, this action alone would negate Jeremy's greatest advantage.

Aether projectiles drilled through his left arm and shoulder. The pain was intense, but less than he had become used to. No longer having to focus on battle, Lux focused on healing the wounds as fast as he could.

"Nice try," Jeremy smirked as he focused on casting a second spell-circle. "You lose."

Before he could complete it, Dallion managed to finish his portal spell. As he did, water poured out of it right onto the floor.

Chapter 990: Down the Rabbit Hole

Both Dallion and Jeremy leaped towards something elevated the moment the water hit the ground. Despite their ability to wield magic, the chaotic effects of electricity would be enough to cause considerable harm. Dallion's goal hadn't been that at all.

As Jeremy landed on a marble table ten feet away, and Dallion used his athletic skills to their limit running along an available wall, the building's circuit breakers did what they were supposed to and stopped all electricity in the house.

"Not confident in your magic?" Jeremy asked, concentrating all the void of his body into a solid blade. It wasn't much—barely longer than a dagger—but it was a weapon capable of causing significant harm.

At this point, Dallion regretted not restocking on car batteries again. Thanks to Alien's illusion method, they were both useful and portable. However, his fear had been that Jeremy might catch on to him if he sensed so much magic approaching his home. Still, he had Nox and Lux. Also, it didn't seem like Jeremy had reclaimed all of his skills. In fact, so far there was evidence of four, possibly five.

How the mighty have fallen, Dallion thought.

With the danger over, he landed back on the wet floor. The power outage had instantly collapsed the portal, stopping more water from flowing in. Now that it had done its job, it didn't matter.

Ripples formed as Dallion hummed a tune in order to make use of his music skills. The emperor, unfortunately, was doing an extremely good job of blocking all of his emotions. There was no telling whether he was angry, afraid, or overconfident. Looking at him, one might say that he was treating the destruction of a large part of his house as a minor inconvenience.

"Security will be here in three minutes," Jeremy said. "You won't be able to explain it all away then," he attempted a music attack.

"I won't have to," Dallion countered. "I just have to make them think you're not who you're claiming to be."

The threat was an outright bluff. Even if Dallion were to use his music skills on anyone who arrived, Jeremy could easily negate the effect and revert things back to normal.

Dashing forward, he combined his attack and guard skills to perform another multi-attack. With spells out of the question, Dallion had the initiative. His plan was to make use of the emperor's inevitable counterattack to trigger the effect of his guard skills. After that, Dallion would have the ability to finish it all in one clean hit.

Splitting into instances, Dallion continued with his strikes and kicks, all the time careful not to allow his opponent to complete a full guard sequence.

As expected, Jeremy did the same. The only difference was that he could only split into two instances instead of three.

"Conquered the world and you still messed up," Jeremy said. The weapon in his right hand shrunk, allowing for another to appear in his left. Now he was equipped with two daggers, even if they were less impressive.

"I didn't have much choice." Even combining all his skills, Dallion was having difficulty.

It wasn't by accident that the motions of his opponent's actions were so fluid. One didn't reach that level through traits and talent alone. He must have been training for years to develop that form. All the surfing, swimming, and other activities the gossip sites had been obsessing about hadn't been just for show. Had he been expecting a visit from Dallion? Unlikely. Rather, he was sending a message just like Kraisten to the watchers and every other awakened in the world. Or maybe he was preparing for something else entirely?

The black blade flew by Dallion's face, nicking him in the process. Lux made the wound quickly disappear, but it was a reminder that Dallion was far from invulnerable.

I need another skill, Dallion thought as he pulled back. Now that he no longer had the element of surprise on his side, he was being pushed into a corner.

Carving. That's what he needed. With that and his other skills, he'd be able to turn the tables and—

A sharp pain pierced his chest. It wasn't anything that Jeremy had done, but one of those spontaneous zaps that he'd occasionally experienced.

Last time I'm helping you! An annoyed, distant voice said.

What the heck? Dallion did a somersault, jumping over Jeremy, then retreating as far away in the room as possible. His actions were still a bit off from the zap, yet he was more worried about the circumstances surrounding it.

"Tired already?" Jeremy mocked. "You're just as pathetic as Simon. All those opportunities and you wasted them all away." He made his way towards Dallion, splashing water with every step. "You could have changed the world. You could have had what you wanted. Instead, you chose not to and blocked the path for those who needed it."

For a fraction of a second, Dallion's vision blurred.

No! Not now! He gritted his teeth. Don't faint now.

Flickers emerged all over the blob that was Jeremy's torso, then quickly faded away. This was beyond unexpected. Dallion's fears quickly evaporated as he realized what had happened.

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Blood trickled from his right nostril, yet it wasn't due to anything bad. True, he had received damage, in a way, but that was part of the price. What he had gained was a new skill; or, rather, an old skill relearned—carving.

"It's not like I had a choice!" he said, continuing with a series of strikes.

his actions were no faster than before, though a lot more precise. Dallion wasn't just aiming to hit specific areas of the body, he was focusing on precise points, like a sculptor removing just the correct amount of clay for a statue to gain form.

A series of finger attacks targeted points on Jeremy's right hand, quickly making him drop the void blade he had been holding. It also helped that Nox would add a scar at two at every opportunity.

Acknowledging the sudden shift in the balance of power, Jeremy leaped back in an attempt to retreat, but Dallion matched his every move, moving forward without fear or hesitation. If one of his instances got wounded, it was simply faded out of existence and replaced by another in the next combat split.

There's no way I'm losing! Dallion told himself.

The second knife melted away, covering Jeremy's skin once more in an effort to reduce the damage he was taking. The effort was only marginally efficient. He kept on being pushed back farther and farther until at one point there was no place left to retreat.

Two and a half potential minutes remained until the arrival of the emperor's security. And even if they were to arrive now, it wouldn't matter. The once omnipotent ruler was up to the wall, reduced to a punching bag.

Dallion could almost see the red rectangles indicating the damage his opponent was taking. Jeremy's reactions had become a lot slower and more chaotic, desperately trying to reduce the number of hits he was sustaining.

Got you, Dallion thought and struck with full strength.

His fist hit the wall, smashing dead center in the head of one of the emperor's instances and less than an inch from the other. A massive spiderweb crack emerged, starting from the point of impact and spreading all the way to the ceiling. At this point, Jeremy knew that any resistance was pointless.

"I didn't waste my opportunity," he said, looking the emperor straight in the eyes. "Architects can't remain in their world. I was cast out."

Jeremy didn't blink.

"You never died?" he asked, a spike of anger piercing through the calm.

"I never died." Dallion pulled his hand back.

The anger coming from the emperor quickly faded away.

"The only choice I was given was to determine who else remained in the world." He took a step back. And I chose everyone to get ejected except the one that counts. "I wasn't allowed to stay."

"Fucked over by the Moons," Jeremy noted, though it was uncertain whether he was referring to Dallion or someone else. "Why did you come here?"

Dallion took a step back and looked around with his instances. The room looked as if a tornado had been through it. The floor was covered with water and glass fragments, not to mention that several of the walls had gaping cracks in them. The only reason that there weren't piles of broken furniture was that the room didn't have any to start with.

"I want to go back," he said in a firm voice. "If anyone knows how to get there, Kraisten said it would be you."

"That guy never could keep his mouth shut." Jerem stepped away from the wall. "What makes you think I'll help you? This is Earth. Moon vows don't work here."

"I know. But you know I can beat the shit out of you if I need to, and even your expensive security firm won't be able to stop me."

The point was well put. Jeremy didn't respond, though it was obvious he wasn't in a position to refuse. Instead, he made a gesture for Dallion to go into another section of the house.

Two minutes later, the sound of sirens filled the neighborhood. The team that arrived was very professional and quick to react. However, they were slightly concerned over why they had driven all the way for a simple power outage. Calls were made, explanations given, one person of the team apologized to Jeremy for the inconvenience and asked for a signature for his daughter.

Jeremy, naturally, was glad enough to accommodate, signing the cover of a magazine on the spot. He then saw the security team out and immediately phoned his agent to get a renovation team to fix the damages. After that was done, he went back to a section of the house that had remained intact. As it turned out, Dallion was waiting for him in the massive living room.

"Quite a place," he said, examining a large and finely crafted painting. "Must have cost you quite a lot."

"Seventy-eight million," Jeremy replied, crossing his arms. "Plus about ten more for the contents. Alice in wonderland," he explained. "A rather costly recreation."

"Not as costly as the first editions in the bookcase." Dallion looked over his shoulder. "Have anything to eat? I didn't get much on the flight."

"You alright with fruit and vegetables? I only eat steak at the end of the month."

"No fish?"

"Only an idiot would touch fish."

Dallion shrugged.

"They'll be coming to fix up the room you destroyed in a few hours. I suggest avoiding that section of the house."

"Yeah, yeah. You don't want any more rumors," Dallion smirked. For some reason, he still felt more animosity than he should have. "Let's drop the crap. Do you know a way back?"

"I might," Jeremy said vaguely. To Dallion's surprise and relief, it didn't seem as if he were lying. "Are you sure you want to, though? The watchers don't mess with those who want to be left alone, but they could get dangerous when stirred. Just like a nest of hornets."

"I'm sure."

Dallion reached for the frame of the painting.

"Don't!" Jeremy took several steps towards him. "It has sentimental value."

Dallion's hand remained where it was, inches from the frame.

"I can't take you back there, but I think I know a way," the emperor quickly added. "I spent years looking into it. You won't get any better information than

mine.” Concern was emanating from him, something that hadn’t been present during the entire battle.

Aware that he had made his point, Dallion took a step back from the painting. If Jeremy hadn’t told him, he would never have noticed the painting of Alice. There were enough details to catch it once one knew where to look, though she was quite different from the popularized depiction of her.

“Never took you for an Alice fanatic,” Dallion said in a mocking tone.

“You would be as well if she were your wife.” Jeremy went up to the painting.

“The second empress,” he added.

“The real Alice of Wonderland was your wife?” Dallion looked at the picture again.

“No, not the “real” Alice, but her mother—the one who the story was really based on.”