

## Leveling up 991

### Chapter 991: The Teen that Tried to Conquer the World

Alice in Wonderland. Dallion knew next to nothing about the book. All his knowledge came from cartoons and movie adaptations. There was no denying that when removing the layers of absurdity that the story could be viewed as a description of the other world. More correctly, it could be viewed as someone retelling a story from an awakened, adding certain elements of his own.

No one could tell whether that had happened or not. Jeremy believed in it, but that didn't make it true. All he had to go by was the story of the woman who had once been his wife in the awakened world, as well as Dallion's great-great-great grandmother and the founder of House Elazni.

Married to someone who died centuries before you were born. Dallion looked at Jeremy. No wonder you went insane.

"Let's talk in the kitchen," Jeremy said with the typical detachment Dallion knew him for in the other world. "I can use a drink."

The drink turned out to be water at a staggering price of five-hundred dollars the bottle. After a sip, Dallion could see why. It would be wrong to say that the water tasted of anything. It was a lot more relevant what it didn't taste of—no additives, excess minerals, or anything that would ruin the taste. One would almost say that it was made specifically for awakened.

"How long have you been back for?" Jeremy asked.

"A few months," Dallion admitted.

"A few months. Your memories must still be fresh. I can't even remember my first few months."

"In what way?"

"The other world enhances our abilities. To be exact, the Moons do. Since there's only one of them on earth, we can never reach the level we had there. If both of us teamed up, we'd probably get beaten up by a single digit newbie. Skills help, but not to the extent you might think."

"Weren't skills supposed to be everything? That was the philosophy of your Order."

"There. Skills here are pretty much analog—you have them or you don't. You can't level them up, and it takes a heck of a lot of training to improve them even a bit. If you go back, you'll be at the bottom of the pile with no guaranteed way to boost your level. Still set on going?"

"You know the answer."

Jeremy laughed, possibly for the first time since Dallion had seen him on Earth.

"Okay, let's get to it."

Going through several rooms of the mansion, the two went into the home theater room. At least it had been a home theater at some point. Five rows of six luxurious seats filled the back. Each had enough space for a person to take a nap if they wanted. Naturally, there was a mini fridge filled with more water and a few bowls of exotic fruit. The only thing missing was the screen.

Jeremy made his way to the front row and sat down. Threads of electricity emerged from the floor, only to be plucked by him midair. Bit by bit, a loom was created, very similar to the one Alien had made, yet comparing this to the mage's was like comparing a stick figure painting to the Mona Lisa.

"You're using this instead of a projector," Dallion muttered.

"Much better. Cheaper, too." He kept on building.

The threads became so close that soon they gave the impression of being a solid block. Then, the really extraordinary thing happened—layers of shapes emerged within, making Dallion see the first real-life version of a hologram.

"Much better than Alien's."

"That kid's here?" Jeremy sounded genuinely surprised. "Didn't think the watchers would let anyone from the Circle go."

"They almost didn't."

"Well, good thing he's alive. Maybe I'll go see him one day."

Dallion couldn't tell whether that was meant as a friendly gesture or as a threat. Alien was to blame for losing the Moonstones, which in turn had helped Simon prevent Jeremy from becoming the Architect. There was a chance that he wasn't set on that, especially after Dallion had told him the shortcomings of the title. Then again, he wasn't willing to bet anyone's life on that.

An image of a newspaper clipping emerged in the aether-loom. Dallion wasn't able to read the text, but it had a picture of a young girl in a straightjacket. More clippings quickly followed; their number so great that they started covering one another.

"It takes some practice to see through the layers," Jeremy humble bragged.

"Once you get it, you'll be able to see all of them simultaneously."

Like hundreds of screens all atop of one another, Dallion thought.

"When I got back, I wanted to kill you," Jeremy continued calmly. "Then, I found out that I wasn't the only awakened on Earth. Hardly unexpected, when you think about it, but it was annoying to find out that a group of bugs had gotten together and formed an organization. To be exact, they kept forming and dissolving secret organizations for centuries, probably millennia. This one was a lot more organized, and very stubborn."

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“I know the feeling.” Dallion concentrated, but still wasn’t able to make out anything beneath the front layer.

“So, I paused a bit to get enough funds to deal with them. Ironically, in the process, I lost my drive.”

“The fading of the memories?”

“Yep.” The man’s fingers kept on moving wildly, as if he were playing a harp. “I still know what happened, or the important things, but I can’t visualize it. And at the same time, I remember friends from high-school I haven’t seen for hundreds of thousands of true time years.”

Finally, the images stopped appearing. Pleased with what he had achieved, Jeremy relaxed his left hand on the armrest of his seat.

“More to your point, I spent a lot of time and money looking into the topic, which is how I found a few favorites.”

“You found Simon,” Dallion said.

“Oh, I definitely found him. Or what’s left of him, rather. Last I checked, he was a ninety-seven-year-old man in southern France,” he said with a chuckle. “Brother Simon,” he added in a French accent. “If you can believe it, he joined a monastery thirty years ago. I can’t say his life was pleasant, but he had the skills to survive, and so he did. But that’s not the big reveal. I found her.”

The newspaper clippings shuffled until a small column went on top.

Teen believes she’s a demon or humanity’s savior. Dallion read the title. There were no pictures, just a brief story of a girl in Scotland who was forcefully taken to a mental institution. From the article, she insisted that she had been bestowed with special powers from another world and was meant to lead humanity.

Several moments later, another article was brought to the front. This one had a picture.

“Wait,” Dallion said. “I’ve seen her...”

The clothes were different, but there was no doubt the face was an exact copy of an echo he had fought—the Star’s echo. At the time, he had believed it to have been created by Arthurows. Clearly, that hadn’t been the case.

“The girl described herself as the Broken Star,” Dallion read out loud, “Fueling speculation that she might have been part of a cult.”

“I bet the person who wrote this doesn’t even have an idea how right he is. She was the original creator of the Star Cultists and, if I remember right, the reason the great city was destroyed.”

The Broken Star... Dallion remembered his experience in the pyramid while exploring the Fallen South. At the time, he found it weird that one of the signs had read "Armoury." It wasn't the English letters that had confused him as much as the needless "u." Now it made sense—the Star had been originally from the UK.

More importantly, it was in the same pyramid that Dallion had found an item from Earth itself.

"She's been kept in a mental institution for the last seven years, at least," Jeremy said. "Heavily sedated with no chance of being discharged. There are also a lot of interesting stories—from the gutter press, mostly—of nasty things happening to people in the facility who had something to do with her."

Not the best biography, to say the least. After being on drugs for so many years, there was every chance that she had forgotten everything she'd known. No wonder Jeremy, or anyone else for the matter, hadn't snatched her from the facility. The girl had become non-communicative. Although, there was one option that no one had exploited.

"Can I skim through those?" Dallion asked, pointing at the images.

"Go ahead. Use your magic threads as a mouse cursor."

After a few attempts, Dallion was able to grasp the basic principle, but his speed and accuracy were like that of a senior citizen struggling with a computer. Despite that, he managed to eventually go through enough snippets until he found what he was looking for.

"She was described as locking herself into her own mind," he said.

"True. Just as it was said that she'd gone into a homicidal rage several times, and almost escaped the facility once."

"She's hiding in her personal realm," Dallion said. "Or that of an object. If I can physically get to her, maybe I can talk to her."

"See? I told you my information is good." The former emperor smiled. "There's just one minor problem, though. She's under constant surveillance."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I'll just turn into a doctor and—"

"Under constant surveillance," Jeremy interrupted. "The watchers are terrified of her, even more than they're terrified of me. The only reason they haven't killed her outright is because the network is a lot stronger in Europe than here."

"Then I'll talk to them."

"You're still not getting the picture. The network doesn't want her in the open, either. Not with the levels of void she has. And trust me, she's probably got a lot. They'll be damned if they let her be harmed by the watchers, though."

"So, it's a stalemate."

“Two groups ensuring that the other doesn’t get her out of there. To have your talk, you’ll have to make it in and out through both. And even then, there’s no guarantee that she’ll have the answers.”

There it was—the greatest concern of all. If this didn’t work, Dallion would have gone through all his best leads, with nothing to show for it. It had to work, though. There was proof she had managed to get something between worlds in the past, and it wasn’t thanks to the Moons.

“Do you have anything recent on her?” Dallion looked at Jeremy. “Taped sessions, doctor reports, articles, anything?”

“No, but I can get some if you want. I know the facility still exists.” He paused. “I can try to find something.”

“Thanks. I’ll also need you to get me there.”

“I really don’t like going to the U.K.” Jeremy sighed. “They don’t pay as well as they used to.”

One warning glance from Dallion quickly made him change his tone.

“Well, I didn’t want to be here during renovations, anyway.” He moved the fingers of his right hand. All images on the aether-loom disappeared. “I’ll need a day to set things up. Not that she’ll mind. In her state, I doubt she can even keep track of time.”

You’re wrong, Dallion thought. If he were in the Broken Star’s place, he’d keep track of every day he’d been there, of every visit, of every interview, of every injection that was made.

After all this time, he couldn’t say that it was a race against time, but every hour of delay was one hour closer to her, reaching her breaking point. The only glimmer of hope he had was that someone who’d withstood the wrath of the Moons would be able to keep their sanity in an Earth mental institution.

Chapter 992: The Break In

“Have you been helping me?” Dallion asked from the realm of the plane seat.

Sadly, there was no answer. He had slept twice in the realm so far in the hope that he might see Euryale, and each time nothing had happened. He’d had dreams—the usual nonsensical chaos that one got after days of extreme tension. Some moments of it could even be described as amusing, yet there was no Euryale.

“Thanks for the carving skill,” he continued. “Could really use the zoology one as well. From what Jeremy dug out, there are guards with dogs at the facility.”

Still nothing.

“I really miss you, Eury. I’ve no idea how much time has passed there, but it won’t be long now. I know I’ve said this before, but this time there’s a real

chance.” He paused. “I know Jeremy might try to stop me. Knowing him, I won’t be surprised if he sells me off to the watchers. If he helps me reach you, the danger’s worth it.”

After spending a few more minutes in the realm, Dallion returned to the real world.

“Drifting again?” Jeremy asked. Conveniently, he was the only other person on the jet.

In addition to the many qualities the magazines and gossip sites portrayed, he was also one of a select group of celebrities that had a pilot’s license. The difference was that he didn’t fly it from the cockpit. Instead, he had modified the inside of the jet to achieve the same with a multitude of magic threads. Having them required that the jet produce a bit more energy, making it inefficient, some would say, even wasteful, but it was a small price to pay for someone who was rich.

“You’ll need to get in better shape to get inside.”

“Anything new happen?”

“No, you just need to be in form. And you aren’t.”

One could argue whether that was the case. Then again, Dallion had spoken with the guardians of the plane and each of Jeremy’s shoes, convincing them to act up if the former emperor tried to do anything threatening.

The Star’s medical facility was in the middle of nowhere, relatively speaking—close enough to a few towns to be reached by car, yet far enough to not be noticed. No one wanted to be near such a facility and even less what took place there.

Jeremy landed the plane near Glasgow, after which he was instantly swept away by his usual group of gossip magazine journalists, local agents, and fashion brands in search of advertising. The degree to which the man was treated as a celebrity was outright astonishing, especially since he still remained a relative unknown outside the world of modeling. There could be no doubt that music skills had a huge benefit, making him famous or incognito, depending on what he wanted.

While all the attention was drawn to him, Dallion sneaked away, leaving on foot. The first part of his travel was walking, in order to leave the bounds of the city. Only then—after getting used to left side driving—did he proceed to hitchhike a ride. Thanks to his level of music, it was elementary to get people to pick him up. If anything, it was a lot more difficult to find a car that would be suitable. Dallion didn’t want to get families in trouble, he also rejected the help of a few senior citizens. On the seventh try, he found the perfect person.

“Hey there,” a pale thin man said in a thick accent. He looked like a stereotypical English professor, with short dirty blond hair, glasses, and a business suit that one would hardly see out of TV dramas. “Where to?”

“Roseta Medical Facility,” Dallion said. “Know where it is?”

“Aye,” the other nodded. “Can only take you part way. It—”

“Would be nice if you can take me up to it,” Dallion interrupted using his music skills. “I’d appreciate it a lot.”

“Sure, sure.” The man smiled as if that had been his intention all along. “Hop in.”

Feeling slightly weird that he had to go where the driver’s seat was supposed to be, Dallion did so.

“Tourist?” the man asked after a while.

“Visiting someone.”

“Ah.” The way the man reacted suggested that he knew enough about the facility to know it wasn’t a place anyone wanted to be. “Should be there in an hour,” he said. “Nasty place. There were protests to get it closed years ago, but nothing happened.”

Protests? It was unusual for the watchers to allow that. Unless the protests had been a show of force from the void network. That would explain how they suddenly stopped. For all intents and purposes, this whole thing felt like an awakened cold war.

The closer they got to the location, the more desolated the surroundings got. Nothing but the empty road, some occasional vegetation and wide-open spaces as far as the eye could see. Jeremy hadn’t been kidding when he said that approaching it would be tricky. Dallion had a plan, of course, and enough batteries to execute it. The main issue was time. Based on the region, he and Jeremy had calculated that it would take a chopper seventeen minutes to reach the facility once Dallion was discovered. That meant that Dallion had to be in and out in ten, or preferably five.

“Stop here,” he said once the building became visible in the distance.

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The man did so without hesitation.

“I won’t take long.” Dallion opened the car door. “Just hang here for a bit.”

The sky was gray, covered in thick clouds, as UK weather was supposed to be. Cracking his fingers, Dallion went on a sprint towards the building.

A ten-foot fence surrounded the facility with signs warning that entry is strictly prohibited. Dallion ignored them, using his athletics and acrobatic skills to leap over. Now there was no turning back.

According to the satellite images, the grounds were guarded at all times by cameras and men with dogs. The cameras were easily disabled with a bit of magic ingenuity. The physical guards were going to be a slight problem, though; more specifically, the dogs. If Dallion had regained his zoology skill, he’d be able to use music skills as on any person. Now, there was no guarantee.

There always was the option to fight his way in, but that ran the risk of the facility entering lockdown. Should that happen, it was going to take Dallion more than seventeen minutes to break through the walls and find the Star.

“Oi!” On cue, a pair of guards ran out of a small auxiliary building separated from the facility.

Initially, Dallion was relieved—none of them had dogs. Unfortunately, that quickly changed as a second pair emerged. Not only did that pair have dogs, but they had already unleashed them.

Crap, Dallion thought, and quickly drew electricity from the batteries in his pockets.

His fingers moved through the air, casting two spells simultaneously. The first one jammed any and all airborne communications. The second created an illusion, transforming Dallion's appearance into that of the facility's latest known patient.

Being isolated from the internet, probably due to awakened security concerns, the facility relied on local copies. Thanks to the marvel of bureaucracy, monthly reports were provided to the respective institutions, and those were a lot more accessible than one might think. Jeremy had managed to get a list of most patient files, and as everyone knew, the only way to get into a heavily guarded facility was to make people think you're trying to get out.

As Dallion was completing his illusion, one of the dogs leaped forward with the attempt to bite his arm. Avoiding it would have been easy, yet being bitten was going to offer a much greater level of believability. After going through the options in his head, Dallion moved his free hand in front, having the canine sink its teeth in it instead.

The pain was surprisingly mild. In all honesty, Dallion hardly felt it at all. The taser that hit him, though, was an entirely different matter.

A wave of magic poured into Dallion, making him feel a lot closer to the power levels he had in the other world. His body, sadly, wasn't used to dealing with the load. For a split second, Dallion felt as if all his nerves had been scraped, making him almost lose consciousness. The irony was that in that very moment; he had the ability to cast a spell that would easily deal with all the guards and their dogs. Sadly, that went against his plan.

Maybe I should change it? Dallion thought.

He'd never thought of using tasers as mini-Moonstones, but clearly it worked. If a guard had one, the others had as well, which meant that—

I'll get him! Dallion heard a voice say. The interesting part was that the voice didn't come from a human, but the second canine that was rushing at him.

Had he just got zoology? Acquiring the skill after being bitten and tased seemed a bit too convenient, though considering that no one would let themselves do that voluntarily, maybe there was something to that. After all, both basic elements of skill learning were present: pain and magic.

"I wasn't trying to escape!" Dallion said, using his music skill to its full ability. "I just wanted to get some air."

"Mike?" one of the guards asked. "How did you get out here?"

That was it. Phase one was all but complete. A member of the group had already been affected. His conviction made the others a lot more receptive to the notion. Even the dogs were convinced they had stopped a potential escape.



“Down!” another guard shouted, ordering the first dog to let go of Dallion’s arm.  
“You’re in trouble now.”

Two pairs of hands grabbed on to Dallion, dragging him right to the entrance. One of the guards kept on trying to get in touch with anyone on his walkie-talkie. Utterly unable to do so, he then rushed in front of the others and punched in a code on the keypad next to the main entrance. An audible click followed.

“We got him,” he shouted inside. “He might need sedating.”

“What? What?” An orderly rushed to the entrance, confused what’s going on.  
“You caught who?”

“I didn’t mean to escape, doc!” Dallion shouted. “I just wanted to see the sky.”

“Oh.” The orderly looked at him. “You again. I warned you what would happen. Hold him,” he told the guards.

Dallion did his best to create the impression he was struggling, but in effect, he was capable of breaking free at any moment. The next part of his plan required him to go through this process.

As the orderly approached, tapping a syringe, Dallion was about to use his music skills to leave everyone with the impression that he had already received the shot. Before he could manage, one of the guards pushed him firmly against the wall. The action wasn’t as strong as it was surprising. More importantly, his face being slammed against the hard surface made him lose the moment.

Fearing that Dallion might break free, the orderly took advantage of the situation, injecting the shot in his arm.

Lux! Dallion shouted mentally.

He’d always had this as a safeguard, but in all honesty preferred not to use it. Sedatives had the same effect as poison and there was no telling whether the firebird was capable of getting rid of all of it. If he fell asleep now, it was all over.

“Hold him for a bit,” the orderly said. “Calm down, Michael. It’ll only take a few seconds.”

I really want to kick your ass, Dallion thought. The fingers of his left hand moved about, forming a two circle heal spell on his palm.

One by one, the seconds dragged on. At every moment, Dallion feared he’d doze off, only to wake up hours later. Thankfully, the moment never came. The mild fatigue that swept through him was gone within seconds.

*Thanks, Lux. I dodged a bullet there.*

“I can take it from here,” the orderly said.

“Are you sure? He’s quite strong.”

“It’s fine,” Dallion whispered, using his music skill again. “I just want to go back to my room.”

“See? He can barely walk.”

The guards let go of Dallion, letting him lean onto the orderly. A few more words were exchanged, after which all guards were back outside. Meanwhile, the orderly assisted Dallion through the empty white corridors.

“Take me to Margaret’s room,” Dallion whispered. “Doctor’s orders.”

Chapter 993: The Broken Star

As the door opened, a smell of chemicals filled Dallion’s nostrils. The combination almost made him take a step back. The cleaners had clearly gone overboard, though maybe with reason. On the bed, with several sets of restraints, lay the person Dallion had come to see.

On paper, her name was Margaret Willows. Dallion, however, only knew her as the Broken Star—supposedly the one who had started it all.

“I’ll be fine alone,” Dallion whispered to the orderly accompanying him. “Go do your rounds.”

The door behind Dallion clicked. Normally there would be no getting out, but that was only if he didn’t have someone like Nox to help when needed.

The girl was still very much a teenager. Given how old the article about her was, she had to have been little more than a child when she was first sent here. Without a doubt, she had done terrible things in the awakened world, but even so, this was the closest thing that Earth had to a prison item.

Without wasting time, Dallion approached the bed.

“Where is she?” he asked all the items in the vicinity.

A chorus of replies instantly followed. Unlike nearly every item Dallion had come across, these didn’t seem surprised that someone could talk to them. That was optimistic—it suggested that the Star had frequently spoken to them.

She’s with me, the IV tube said. Will you join her?

Spending one’s time in an IV realm was slightly macabre, but after all this time, the Star had probably gotten bored enough to enter anything she was in contact with. Taking a deep breath, Dallion touched the tube.

### **SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING**

Reality shifted, transporting Dallion into a world of a giant tube, continuing into the distance. The interesting thing was that he found himself in the tube itself, almost like in a sci-fi movie. Alien looking structures stretched in all directions, and if one looked straight up, they’d see the opposite point of the tube’s diameter, hanging over like a sky.

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

**The land has achieved its destiny.**

Achieved? Normally, everything on Earth was supposed to be sealed. Clearly, the Star had a few tricks left after returning to the world.

“Why are you here?” a voice suddenly asked behind him, in a distinct British accent.

Dallion’s usual reaction was to split into three instances.

**COMBAT INITIATED**

**MAJOR WOUND**

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

**MAJOR WOUND**

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

**MAJOR WOUND**

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

A series of bullets riddled one of the instances, causing it to abruptly fade away. No sooner had that happened, that the Star pointed her weapon to one of the remaining two.

“I asked you a question,” she said in a merciless voice.

It can’t be, Dallion thought. The person that stood before him was a splitting image of the Star echo he had fought all that time ago.

“You’re just like in the pocketknife,” Dallion said. In his mind, however, he was already fighting.

“Pocketknife?” the girl lowered her weapon. She was wearing the same goth clothes and mascara that the echo had been. “You mean Goth?” she asked, as if pulling out a memory from an eternity ago. “So, something must have survived those bastards. That still doesn’t answer my question.”

Dallion attempted to use his aura vision on the girl. After a bit of effort, a rectangle emerged above her, but the only thing he could see within was blackness.

“I came to ask you something,” he went straight to the point. “You were able to take objects from Earth. How—”

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“Ask me something?” The girl laughed. “You know where you are, right?”

“In the loony bin,” Dallion kept his calm.

“I sense the arrogance of a domain ruler. What were you before you were kicked out? Ninety? A hundred?”

“A hundred and sixty,” Dallion said.

The girl’s smile vanished.

“An architect.” Envy emanated from her. Interestingly enough, Dallion wasn’t able to see any blobs within the girl. It was almost as if he were talking to an Overseer, yet not quite. “Since you’ve seen Goth, you must have popped up a while after me.”

“I know you found a way between worlds,” Dallion pressed on. “I want to know where it is.”

“You want what?”

“I want to go back.”

“You need to be here more than me. The Moons don’t like anything moving between worlds on its own. And since you probably purged all the void, you bloody well can’t use that.”

“Tell me how to get there and I’ll deal with the rest.”

The Star narrowed her eyes—made all the more apparent by the many layers of mascara.

“No,” she said.

“No? Why not?”

“Because you want it too much.” The Star sounded almost amused. “It’s my policy never to give anything to people who want it too much.” She paused. “Unless they give me something in return.” The pistol in her hand melted into a block of blackness that quickly merged with her black clothes.

Dallion had gone through this conversation hundreds of times in his head. After all the time on sedatives and drugs, he imagined she’d need a very long explanation of what was going on, who he was, and how she could help him. Not once did he imagine she’d be this sharp. The girl had managed to retain her sanity by entering realms and talking to the guardians. It wouldn’t be out of character for her to have destroyed a few in the process, out of boredom.

The question was, what did he have to offer? What could someone in her position want? Only one thing came to mind, although he wasn’t certain it was a good idea.

“I can get you out of here,” he said. “But if you act crazy again, you’ll end up back in.”

“I knew you’d go for that.” The Star sighed. “I’d hoped you’d at least be original in your lies.”

“I have a way to get rid of the drugs in your system,” he said. “It might hurt, though.”

“Shock therapy? They’ve tried.”

“I have a healing firebird.”

The girl froze, as if Dallion had uttered a forbidden taboo. He could sense disbelief emanating from her to such a degree that even the void matter wasn’t able to hold it in.

“I’ve no idea how it’ll affect your void, but it’ll get rid of the drugs. I know from experience.”

The gun appeared once again in her hand.

“Companions don’t survive the journey,” she said, pointing the weapon at Dallion’s chest.

“These ones did. They’re void creatures. A crackling and a firebird.”

“Have you any idea how rare it is for that to occur?” The Star didn’t appear to believe him. “Getting a crackling is a million to one, and as for a healing firebird...” her hand moved slightly, as she fired three shots.

Dallion instinctively attempted to evade them, but both his reflexes and the awakening markers proved too slow.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

### **MAJOR WOUND**

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

A void bullet pierced his left shoulder.

Splitting into instances, Dallion dispersed in different directions, only to have the star lower her weapon again.

“Prove it,” she said. “Heal yourself without using spells, and I might believe you.”

Dallion gritted his teeth. There were undoubtedly a lot less painful ways to prove the same. It wouldn’t be a good idea to argue, though. Their power level was highly unbalanced in her favor.

The seconds crawled on. Dallion knew that Nox was within him, yet there was no telling how efficient he was in the realms. Awakened logic suggested that the firebird should be more powerful here, yet time in the real world passed a lot slower.

For a quarter of a minute, nothing happened. Then, finally, a green rectangle emerged.

### **MINOR HEAL**

**Your health has been increased by 5%**

“What do you know?” The pistol melted away again. “You really kept a healing pet.”

“I said that already,” Dallion grumbled. “So, do we have a deal?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Provided you get me out of here first.”

“Are you kidding?”

“You’re desperate. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have gone to this piece of hell to ask a favor from the vilest being in existence.” She crossed her arms. “If you want the answer, you’ll hear it after I’m out.”

“How do I know you’re really telling the truth?” Dallion asked. “You could be doing a cold reading.”

“That’s for you to find out.”

You piece of crap, Dallion thought.

She was right, though. He had taken a lot of risks on the faint glimmer of hope that he’d find his answer here. It was unlikely he’d just walk away. On the other hand, the Stars weren’t known for their honesty. There was the option to split into instances and try a few approaches, but chances were that the Star would see through that.

“You’re just as desperate as I am,” Dallion said in a final bluff. If there was something that he’d learned was that people rarely gave up hope once it was given to them. “You don’t want to tell me? Fine. But I showed you proof, so will you. If not, I’ll leave and let you rot here. And trust me, after I leave, no one will be able to come back. The entire awakened world is carefully watching you. When they see you were close to escape, they’ll triple the safeguards not to allow that to happen.

It couldn’t be said that the option was preferable, but Dallion knew he couldn’t afford to bluff. If she refused, he was perfectly prepared to hunt down other leads, even if it might take him years. Based on the turbulent changes in the Star’s emotions, she feared the same.

“What’s your plan for escape?” she said. “With specifics.”

“I use my firebird to get you on your feet, then break the lock with my crackling,” Dallion explained. “That’ll get us in the corridor. I already messed up all electronic surveillance, which leaves the guards and orderlies. They’re very susceptible to music skills, as are their dogs.”

The Star just stood there, without reacting.

“How many skills do you remember?” she asked.

“A lot. So, what is it?”

Everything considered, Dallion put his chances at ninety percent. Given what the girl had been through, though, there was a fifty-fifty chance that she might refuse, just based on pure pettiness.

“I can’t give you any proof,” she said after a while. “If I do, it’ll be the same as telling you everything. Then you’ll just leave me here.”

## MINOR HEAL

**Your health has been increased by 5%**

Another rectangle appeared above Dallion.

“You’ll have to decide. All I can say is that it won’t be easy. Chances are that even after I tell you the way, you won’t be able to make use of it. The Moons guard their secrets jealously. I still think that the real reason they destroyed the eternal city was because I found a way to bypass them. There’s a chance that they do the same to you.”

“They know I’m trying to go back. They’ve known I will even before they sent me here.”

“Which is something else that doesn’t make sense. You shouldn’t have the will to get back. I was the greatest power in existence; nothing came close, and I still will be damned before I set foot back there. Why are you different?”

“I don’t know,” Dallion admitted. She wasn’t the first person to tell him this. “I just know I have to.”

“You’re saying that you’ll use your firebird to burn through the drugs?”

Dallion nodded.

“I’ll let you burn through my void matter as well,” she said. “Without it, I’ll be just another no-level awakened without even a fraction of your skills. Of course, I could be lying, but that’s a risk you’ll have to take. I’ll be relying on you to get us out. Once I’m safe, I’ll tell you everything.”

Not the offer that Dallion wanted, but it was unlikely he’d get something better. It was all down to trust and his ability to make the Star stick to her word.

“Alright,” he agreed. “Once you’re safe. Now, let’s get started.”

Chapter 994: The Secret That Destroyed a City

The heavy smell of cleaning detergent greeted Dallion as he returned to the real world. His conversation with the Star had been short. Thankfully, the time passed in reality had been even shorter.

With a slight hesitation, he removed the IV and took hold of the girl’s hand. No sooner had he done so when a blotch of void matter covered the palm of her hand, as thick as a lump of clay.

“You know what to do, Lux,” Dallion said and placed his hand over it.

The void matter squirmed as it came into contact with healing magic, yet refused to flee. It seemed that the Star had kept her word. Black vapors came out, mixing the smell of burned bone to the other smells of the room.

Wanting to speed things up, Dallion used his free hand to cast a healing spell on the girl’s face. Everything considered, it wasn’t going to be much, but at this point, every little bit helped.

For close to twenty seconds, Dallion could feel the void matter squish beneath his hand, as if he were holding jelly. Then, finally, he felt the sensation of solid flesh beneath. It was just a small match, but an indication that the real work could start.

Took your time, he thought.

In the grand scheme of things, not even half a minute had passed, and still it seemed like such a waste of time. The watcher choppers were no doubt already on their way. Judging by his own brief experience with sedatives, it was going to take at least several minutes for the girl's system to get rid of it. And that didn't account for atrophy and orientation. After spending all this time here, Dallion had to assume that she wouldn't be as mobile as he would have liked, making every moment of the essence.

One of the girl's fingers twitched.

Dallion looked at the girl's face. Her eyelids abruptly opened as she focused on him.

"Don't rush it," he said, suspecting her intention. "We need to do this right."

The Star's lips moved in an attempt to speak, yet no sounds came out. It was only on her third attempt that she managed to compose a phrase.

"Bloody Architect," she uttered.

"I've been called worse," Dallion replied without hesitation.

The girl smiled. All the fingers in her hand could move now and she used them to grip onto Dallion's hand. The grip wasn't particularly firm, but Dallion could feel strength constantly returning to it.

It would have been nice to take that as a sign that her recovery could be faster than suspected. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. It took well over four minutes for her to attempt to sit up, then half a minute more for her to stand on her own two feet.

"I don't suppose you brought some clothes," she said, looking at the medical gown she had been put in.

"I didn't think I could get you out. I just planned for the chat."

"At least you're honest." Of course, both of them knew that lies could easily be detected with the abilities they possessed. "So, we just walk out?" She looked at the door.

"No, we run out. Watcher choppers are already on their way. We must get as far away from this place as possible before they get near."

"Watcher choppers?" the Star looked at him.

"It's the organization that keeps track of awakened," he explained. "No memories from the awakened world, but enough skills and knowledge to have an idea of what's going on."



“Watcher choppers...” she repeated.

“I’ve seen them in action. They’re well organized and funded. Almost like...” he stopped. Originally, he was about to say the Order of the Seven Moons, when he realized that was before her time.

“Watcher choppers,” she said yet again. “I like that phrase. I’ll be stealing it from you.”

“Very funny.” Dallion glanced at the door, then at her again. “Are you well enough to walk?”

The Star let go of his hand and took a few steps in the room. Her balance seemed perfectly restored.

“Looks like.”

“How about running?”

“Let’s find out.”

With a nod, Dallion went to the door and put his hand on the spot where the handle was supposed to be. A series of deep cracks appeared. They were followed by a second and third.

Sorry, door, Dallion said. Hope it didn’t hurt too much.

With the tongue of the lock no more, the door swung open.

“Okay.” Dallion reached out to the Star with his left hand. “Time to go.”

The two rushed into the corridor.

“Emergency session,” Dallion shouted, using his music skills. It was a terrible excuse, but music made the implausible likely. “We’re going outside for an emergency session.”

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The orderly who had brought Dallion to the Star’s room looked at the pair as they were rushing by and just nodded. Everyone knew that doctors were a weird bunch. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen a doctor rush out a patient, after all. And Dallion was a world-renowned therapist, so everything had to be okay.

“No defenses?” the Star asked.

“They’re just human,” Dallion explained as he went for the exit.

Two of the guards had remained in front of the facility, engaging in idle chatter. The “escape attempt” had been the highlight of the week and would remain so for months to come.

“Taking her to do an MRI,” Dallion blabbered, the first thing that came to mind. As for you, he addressed the dogs, you’re happy to see us again.

The guards weren't certain what to make out of this, especially so soon after a breakout. However, seeing their dogs wag their tails in joy made them relax. Animals were a key judge of character, after all. If they were calm, then everything had to be fine.

"Let me help you with the gate," one of them said, rushing to open it for them.

"Thanks." Dallion smiled.

"No worries. You take care, right?"

With a brief wave, Dallion hurried off, leading the Star by the hand. Anyone with an ounce of common sense would have discerned that something was not quite right. Even if Dallion happened to be a doctor at twenty, people weren't just whisked out of mental institutions in their nightgown.

The walk picked up pace until it became a run. So far, there was no sign of any watchers. Maybe they hadn't noticed or didn't care, after all? Even if that were the case, Dallion couldn't take the risk. Complacency was the greatest reason for failure. The best way was to continue with the original plan.

"You brought a car?" the Star asked, as the two rushed towards it.

"We're not taking it," Dallion replied briefly. "It's bait for the choppers."

"Ah, for the watcher choppers," the girl said with a smirk.

Dallion was just about to make a sarcastic comment when he heard it—the sound he had been dreading even since jumping the facility's fence. A faint sign of chopper blades was audible in the distance. They remained too far away to be seen, even with his awakened senses, but they were approaching and a lot faster than they were supposed to.

Seven minutes. That was approximately how long Dallion had broken into the facility. Apparently, it hadn't been enough.

"Shit!" he hissed through his teeth. "Start digging!"

He let go of her and rushed to the car.

"Get out of here!" he shouted as loud as he could. "You're late, so you better step on it!"

It remained unclear whether the driver understood what he meant, but the music skill used managed to clear any blanks. Burning rubber like a race car driver, the man turned around and sped off. With luck, that would attract the choppers' attention and grant Dallion enough time.

Turning around, he found that the Star was just looking at him, not doing a thing.

"Why?" she asked.

"They're on their way!" He said, hastily taking out car batteries from his pockets. "I need to make an illusion."

"But why dig?"

“I don’t have time to make it properly. I need to cover them with soil so they aren’t detected!”

Without warning, day changed into night. A veil of impenetrable darkness covered dozens of feet, shrouding Dallion and the Star from reality. Dallion had seen firsthand how effective that could be. This veil was different from Jenna’s, though. He could feel the nothingness of the void resonate within it. Just by looking at it, his conscious mind was certain that nothing beyond it existed. There was no world, no sky, and definitely no “watcher choppers.” Everything beyond was nothing but endless nothingness.

“Surprise,” the Star said, any trace of humor vanishing from her face.

“You didn’t get rid of your void,” Dallion said. And he had been so certain that he couldn’t see any within her.

“If something is good at hiding, it would be great at hiding itself.” The Star took a few steps towards him, then sat down. “How long do we have to wait here?”

Dallion wasn’t certain what to say. If it came to a fight, he had a minor advantage thanks to the remaining car batteries. Yet, he wasn’t certain how long they would last. The Star likely wasn’t, either, or she would have attacked him already.

“Ten minutes,” he said. “Half an hour at most.”

“Half an hour. I guess enough time to have a chat. A promise is a promise, after all.”

Concentrating, Dallion looked at the girl. Now that she had stopped pretending, he could see the void tendrils intertwined with her magic threads. There weren’t a lot of them—even less than what Jenna had. The difference in skill level, though, was apparent.

“Our deal was that I’ll tell you everything once we’re safe,” she continued. “Well, I see this as being good enough. Also, thanks for warning me about the watcher choppers. I’ll keep that in mind so I don’t end up back there again.”

Dallion swallowed.

“Do you know why I was called the Broken Star?” she asked.

“You were the star pupil who wanted to become the second Architect.”

“There’s that, yes. It doesn’t explain the Broken, though. It’s used because the Moons broke me. I was the most powerful awakened the world had seen and still, they refused to accept me.”

“One fallen from grace,” Dallion whispered.

“That’s one way of looking at it. It didn’t help that I was a brat. I was so obsessed with what the Moons thought about me that it drove me nuts. In a way, being locked up in that piece of hell helped me clear my mind and see things from the proper perspective.”

There was no telling how long she had spent talking to item guardians; probably decades, if not centuries, Dallion would guess.

“And being broken made me want to compensate. I was driven to despise those fuckers to the point that I thought of ways to circumvent them. And I did.”

Void matter poured out of her pores, transforming the hospital gown into a black t-shirt and a pair of black jeans.

“That was the reason that the Moons destroyed the city—the fact that I managed to pull it off and by doing so, I found the greatest lie there was. Do you know anything about the Eighth Moon?” she asked.

“It’s the first Moon,” Dallion said, still going through combat scenarios in his mind. “The one that banished all races and summoned the Seven new Moons to —”

“False,” she interrupted. “The Eight Moon is the only Moon.”

Dallion blinked in confusion.

“The Seven Moons were never Moons. They only appear to be when seen from a certain perspective. The truth is that they’re actually planets.”

Planets? Dallion was just about to ask something stupid, when a thought popped into his mind. He remembered seeing pictures of the Earth made by Nasa, even the “blue marble.” If viewed from the moon, Earth would be no different—just a blue sphere floating about in the night sky. Just like a moon—a Blue Moon.

“Earth,” he said, still struggling to come to terms with the concept. “Astreza is Earth.” The deity had never sent him to another world. It had taken Dallion back to itself.

“There you go. And what does that make the awakened world?”

Dallion didn’t say it, even if he knew. If what she was saying was true, then the awakened world—the one he had spent years leveling up, the same that Euryale was stuck on—was the same satellite that billions of people had looked up at every single night: Earth’s moon.

Chapter 995: The Final Piece of Knowledge

“It can’t be this moon!” Dallion said, once the initial shock had gone. “People would have noticed six more planets floating about.”

Or would they? Dallion remembered watching astronaut interviews as a child. One of the things that the people who’d been in space said was that it changed their perspective. It would be within Astreza’s power to place a limiting echo in every person born, preventing them from seeing any of the other Moons. If that were the case, though, it meant that humanity could realistically reach other inhabitable worlds at will.

“And I had hoped you’d be smarter than an ant,” the girl sighed, disappointment emanating from her. “You’re still looking at the obvious. If there were seven

planets around the Moon, it would hardly remain a moon. What it did was to place itself in seven realities at the same time. In each reality there's a planet—a different planet—with a different race on it. Dwarves, humans, furies, gorgons, and all the rest also have a moon in the sky—a single Moon. That's how each of them can send people from themselves to the awakened world."

Dallion kept on staring. Useless trivia popped up in his mind—random memories from his childhood days when he was interested in space.

By the Star's logic the fallen south was in effect the Aitken basin—an immense impact crater on the far side of the Moon. Supposedly it was one of the largest impact craters in the solar system, and now Dallion knew why. By the same principle, the forbidden north had to be the moon's north pole.

"What exactly did you do to find out?" Dallion asked.

"I guess I spoke too soon," the girl's attitude changed. "You are asking the right questions. Tell me, once you enter a realm, what's the only way to see the real form of the object you're in?"

"You leave the realm."

"And how do you do that?"

"You just..." Dallion stopped. There were three ways he knew of: will himself out—using the guard skill ability when necessary—dying, or getting ejected by the owner of the realm. "Death, ejection, and doing it yourself."

"In terms of the world, death and ejection are the same thing. Doing it yourself works, but there are serious restrictions. There's one other way, though. You can go beyond the limits of the realm."

Of course. The realms didn't have limits—upon approaching them, the realm pushed people back, preventing them from ever getting there. Magic put an end to that, though. Thanks to it, a person could actually reach the limits of a realm; and with the correct spell—go beyond them. Dallion had done the same during his Academy trial when he and his classmates had traveled through various realms with the goal of obtaining Galatea's Moonstone.

"You went through the aether bubble," Dallion said. Just like Adzorg's device did, he added mentally.

"The shield that keeps the void at bay. It was said to be impossible, but as long as you can control both magic and void matter, it's surprisingly easy. Of course, by easy, I mean for me. It took me a while, but I was able to peek beyond the veil and found that I didn't need the Moons to get to Earth. No one did. I could have connected all seven worlds and brought in an age that the universe had never seen."

"And that's when they stopped you."

“It was more a warning than anything else. Even they know that’s what should happen. They just thought I was going too fast.” She shrugged. “I guess they want it to occur the “natural” way with hundreds of Architects doing their part. Or not. You can never tell what the Moons are thinking.”

“Is that how I get back?” Dallion asked, surprised at the eagerness of his own question. He had just heard the most universe-shattering revelation possible, to the point that he still wasn’t certain whether it was true or not. And yet, his instincts urged him to view it in a positive light.

“There’s something broken about you,” the girl noted. “I guess if there wasn’t, you wouldn’t have broken me out.” She paused, looking briefly at the void above them.

The sound of helicopter propellers was clearly audible now. Awakened were carefully examining the area, searching for signs of magic use. Given that Margaret was missing from her bed, they’d probably spend a while in the area, yet still find nothing.

“Astresa is the only one who could get you back directly,” the Star said. “You might try asking him, or blackmailing him with what you’ve learned. The alternative is to go there yourself.”

“As simple as that?” The question wasn’t meant to be sarcastic. After what had happened in the awakened world, Dallion could feel there was a catch.

“Oh, he won’t like it, of course. The rest of them wouldn’t, either. There’s nothing they could do, but Astreza might.”

“What do you think he’ll do?”

“You have a good imagination. Figure it out. Does this make us even?”

That was another tricky question. Although she was nowhere as powerful as in the awakened world, there was no telling what letting her go would result in. It was possible that she’d go after the watchers for vengeance. It was possible that she might become their leader. With all the skills Dallion had re-learned, he stood a chance of defeating her. He could return her to the mental institution and let her remain there for the rest of her days. She had told him what he wanted to know.

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“Yes,” he said reluctantly. “As long as you don’t stir things up on Earth.”

“An Architect to the last,” the Star let out a single chuckle. “Don’t worry, I have no use running this place. It’s too boring. Besides, I’ve seen what Astreza could really do. Keep that in mind when you try to get back. You’ve no idea what a Moon is really capable of.”

Choppers kept taking turns roaming over the scene until evening. Then, when even the last skeptic had come to the conclusion that Dallion and the Star had left the area, the search was called off. Without a doubt, that would also mark the end of the surveillance over the mental institution. Without the Star, the place posed no interest whatsoever. Maybe the watchers would transform it into a place to keep unruly awakened, or maybe the network would transform it into a facility in which the void touched would get the void removed. As far as Dallion was concerned, it didn't matter. He had a bigger problem to deal with.

The parting was brief and non-eventful. Each of the two went their separate ways. There were no threats, no goodbyes, just two people returning to their impossible lives in a world that didn't know a thing.

Dallion spent the entire night walking. Twice he was stopped by police officers who were curious where someone was going on foot in the middle of nowhere. It would have been easy to have them give him a ride, but Dallion just thanked them for their concern and had them drive on.

Finding a way to get to the moon. Never before had he been so close, and yet so far away. Humanity had reached the stage at which rockets left for space every day. Even so, trips to the moon were wishful thinking and the last time a human had set foot there was decades ago.

If he had his previous magic abilities, he could try to fly there himself. Better yet, he could make a portal that would teleport him there. Right now, he couldn't reach the atmosphere without a large source of energy, and no gas generator would let him get in orbit.

*If I was outside, I'd take you there.*

The female voice echoed in his head.

Dallion stopped mid step, then concentrated.

*It can't be that difficult.*

There was something about it that sounded familiar. Not the sound of it, or the intonation, but the attitude behind it all.

"Aqui?" Dallion asked.

Took you long enough! The reply was meant to be grumbly, but Dallion could feel unadulterated joy and relief. How come you kept talking to everyone else, but me?

She wasn't wrong. Ever since he'd learned of Nox's existence, he had addressed the crackling and Lux, and even Gleam, in the hopes she'd be able to help out. Not once did he consider talking to Aquilequia, possibly because she had only been with him for a very short while.

"You didn't remain in the awakened world?" he asked.

I'm a great dragon! The voice said proudly. I snuck in.

That was something unexpected. Then again, for a creature made of magic itself, there were a lot more exceptions than for anyone else. The dragon had probably been curious what Dallion's world

might be, so she had lodged herself in his personal domain before he had been cast out. It was a stupid thing to do, but Dallion couldn't help but be thankful.

"The time I fainted on campus," he said. "That was you, wasn't it?"

Well, the woman said that it takes lightning for you to regain a skill, Aquilequia replied with a degree of guilt. And she was right! Look how many skills I helped you learn!

"A warning would have been nice." Just like Aquilequia to remain as stubborn as before. In that way, she was worse than a cat. "Thanks, though. You did help a lot."

*Sure did!*

"Why didn't you talk before?"

*Do you have any idea how difficult it's to talk here? The bird and the kitten can't manage it at all. Second to zapping you, talking is exhausting.*

Clearly, Earth made companions weaker as well, though only to a degree. Nox seemed in great shape as ever, and Lux's healing abilities were a lot faster... as long as they were done in the real world. If Dallion were to guess, he'd say that Aquilequia's "zapping" was only powerful in his awakening realm. Learning Zoology must have helped him hear her better, though only her. There would be no way Lux wouldn't chirp his head off if he could.

"Get some rest, Aqu. I might need you later."

More skill learning? the dragon asked.

"Maybe."

Two skills remained for him to relearn: herbalism and arts. There were a few trait abilities he still lacked—spark and line attacks, more specifically. Hopefully, he'd be able to re-acquire them as well. As the Star said, Astreza would do everything in his power to keep him from returning to the awakened world. In order to succeed, Dallion had to be ready for it. Also, for that, he'd need more than skills alone.

The first thing he did upon arriving in Glasgow was ask someone for his phone. Dallion only needed to make one call, but for it, he wasn't going to use the touch screen. Instead, he drained half the battery of the device and used it to spread through the cell network. A few seconds later, he had found his target.

"Still alive?" Jeremy asked from the other end. He also was using magic.

"Did you finish your business?"

"Business? What business? I'd be lucky to make a few million. I told you, I don't like this place much."

"Lucky for you, we're going back."



There was a prolonged silence.

“You found what you were looking for,” Jeremy said with a touch of envy.

“Yes, but I’ll need some help to do it. And not just you. Call Kraisten and tell him to bring Alien and Katka. All of us need to talk.”

“Alien in the same room as me?” The former emperor laughed. “For that alone, I’ll arrange it. Just don’t break anything. I just got the house renovated.”

“Sure. Also, if you know anything that I can use for magic, get it. I won’t be able to pull off the next part with car batteries alone.”

“Why? Where are we going?”

“The moon. I’m going to the moon.”

#### Chapter 996: A Plan in Motion

Jenna was the first to arrive at Jeremy’s mansion. Despite her attempts, everyone could sense how starstruck she was by being in Jeremy’s presence. Apart from being a supermodel, he was well known in the void network, not least because of the show of force he had displayed when the watcher organization had reared their head.

Although he knew that he’d have to repeat everything again, Dallion went through his recent discovery, vaguely mentioning that he had heard it from the Broken Star. At this point, the secret of her escape had probably crossed the entire globe.

There was a lot to take in. Every few minutes Dallion would stop, so Jenna could rationalize things in her head. Then, under the amusing glance of Jeremy, he would continue.

It wasn’t until the next day that Kraisten arrived. Even with the tickets purchased and mailed by Jeremy, the man had refused to use his abilities to get any advantages. The main reason for that was his intention to teach the mages humility. Judging by how quiet Alien appeared, one could come to the conclusion that the Kraisten had succeeded. Based on the emanations of anger, it was clear that the success was only partial.

Much to Dallion’s regret, the deputy marshal had refused to come. The previous Architect had taken the pains to send a patrol car to Jeremy’s estate to check for a domestic disturbance. Since Jeremy had never been married or in any relationship, at least in this world, everyone could tell that the patrol car had been sent as a warning. The deputy marshal didn’t care what Dallion had found and didn’t want to get involved in it.

Once evening came, and everyone was enjoying the food that Jeremy had ordered, Dallion finally revealed the secret to the rest of the group. Reactions were all over the place: from panic and disbelief to mild amusement.

“You want to go to the moon?” Katka asked amid almost hysterical laughter.

“That’s a new one, even for you.”

“It actually was attempted by an archmage once,” Jeremy said casually. The instant he did, Katka’s laughter stopped, and Dallion would swear that she

managed to sit to attention. "He failed, of course, killed by the Order's guardians. My echo tried to warn him a few times."

"We're not there," Kraisten said, still deep in thought. "You'll make us build a spaceship, aren't you?"

"Only a construction worker could come up with such a response," Jeremy laughed. "You haven't changed a bit."

"What other option is there? Catapult him there?"

Dallion understood the dilemma. However, Kraisten wasn't that far off from the truth. When it came down to it, everything was a matter of force. If they could use enough magic to propel Dallion with enough force in the correct direction, there was every possibility that he reached his destination. Whether he'd do that in one piece was a different topic altogether.

"You help me sneak on a rocket," he said.

Everyone went silent.

"Hey, it's not as difficult as it sounds. It's not like there's one launch per year. I'm not saying that we hijack it, or that I even sneak aboard one with people in it. I could travel as cargo. I'll just get rid of the real one."

The silence continued for ten full seconds more.

"Sometimes, I'm really ashamed we're related." Kraisten shook his head, arms crossed. "Have you even thought this through? How are you going to breathe?"

"That's why Jeremy has ordered a magic power source. I'll use that to create air. Lux will handle the rest. From what I remember, it takes a few days to reach the moon. I can survive without food or water until then."

"Living in your piss and shit."

"As I said," Jeremy joined in. "The archmage was very convinced he could reach one of the moons. The empire held a lovely ceremony for him. I think he received some honorary title or something. I can't remember."

"What if he uses void matter?" Jenna asked. "That would help. If he leaves Earth's orbit, maybe that could keep him safe?"

Everyone looked at her.

"Doubtful, also impossible since he can't use it and has no intention of learning how to. Isn't that right, Dal?" Jeremy mocked.

"Even if all that's possible, I still don't see you making it to the rocket," Katka returned to the conversation. "That's not like breaking into a loony bin. There are

cameras and sensors everywhere. If one of them malfunctions, they don't just ignore it. They stop the launch until they have cleared things out."

The argument intensified with half the group pointing out various critical issues and Dallion attempting to provide solutions. After a while, even he had to admit that he was looking at a perfect storm of coincidences. It wouldn't be right to say that his chances of success were zero, but anything above ten percent was stretching it.

All this made him feel so mad inside. His goal was so closely within reach that he could almost feel it, and yet the final step was more than he could take. When it came to it, if no other solution could be found, he'd still have to take it. A ten percent chance of returning to Eury was better than zero percent, even if he could spend the rest of his life in absolute luxury thanks to his awakened skills.

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"I can get you a rocket," Alien said all of a sudden.

"You?" Jeremy asked, more astonished than anyone else.

"I..." Alien broke out in sweat, feeling the pressure of the emperor's gaze upon him. "I'm a C-suite executive in United Launch Alliance. I might have abused my skills a bit the first few years when I was here."

"And then you wonder why the watchers were after you," Dallion said beneath his breath.

"I was in it for the glory, alright? I could make enough money a lot faster!" the mage snapped back. "Point is, I still have the title. When I went low, I used a few echoes to have everyone forget me, but I'm still on the books. I have the title. I can get you on a manned mission. It won't be to the moon, just a test in high orbit, but it'll be better than you hugging a satellite."

"Little Alien an executive," Kraisten said, then sighed. "I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry."

"Apparently, I have two archmages with aspirations to get to a moon," Jeremy noted, amused. "In any event, that settles it. What do you need the rest of us for?"

"Interference," Dallion said. "The watchers won't be happy with the idea. If they find out, they'll try to stop me. Then, there's Astreza."

All amused expressions quickly became solemn again. Two people in the room remembered what it was like going against a Moon. The rest had a good enough imagination to picture it.

"If he interferes, you're done," Kraisten said in a firm tone.

“Depends. If he does through an avatar, you’re right. Yet he’s let me get this far without doing anything, so there’s a chance he can’t interfere directly. He’s still in the Eighth Moon’s orbit. The rules could still apply.”

Hearing the Earth described as being in the moon’s orbit brought a few tense chuckles. The truth was that Dallion seriously considered that possibility. While he would never admit to it, that was part of the reason he had shared his idea with all friendly acquaintances. If the Blue Moon was to act, this gave the perfect excuse—an event that, according to the Broken Star, had caused Astreza to help destroy the greatest city in the awakened world, reducing it to wilderness and ruins. It was by no means a guarantee, but one could take the lack of any unexplained accidents as a good sign.

“You’re asking a lot, kid,” Kraisten said.

“I know.” Dallion nodded. “But so did you. Recklessness was the first achievement I got upon awakening. I’ve always done things that I shouldn’t have, even after returning to this world. All of you suspected that I might suggest something crazy, and you still came.”

“Not all of us,” Alien grumbled.

“You didn’t have to tell me about your rocket.”

“You’d have gone either way!” Yet even as the mage said it, Dallion couldn’t feel any negative emotions emanating from him. There was only determination.

There was a time when Dallion wouldn’t have imagined he’d ever be here. Everyone present, with one exception, would have killed him at some point or other. Katka had tried numerous times, several of which were in the world of furies. Alien and the Emperor had directly clashed with him on several occasions. Even Jenna might have fought against him had they been in the same time period.

Nothing of that remained, as if it had been left behind in the awakened world. Maybe there was a small part of them that wanted him to succeed and act as their proxy, escaping to a world where everything was possible?

“I have a question.” Katka semi raised her hand. “Suppose you make it. What then?”

“What do you mean?” Dallion arched a brow.

“When you get there, you might be a level one again. And even if you’re not, the Moons will have the power to punish you. They’ve obviously done it before.”

“I doubt they’ll spoil their new world so soon after leveling.”

“And if they do?”

“Then...” All hesitation vanished from Dallion’s mind. “Then at least I’d be with the one I love, achieving the thing I wanted. I’ve already lived for a few thousand years, give or take. Not bad for a human, don’t you think?”

The question effectively brought the conversation to an end. Jeremy excused himself, then went to sleep in the master bedroom. One by one, the others did the same. Each of them had a guest bedroom, which was more luxurious than anything they were used to on Earth. Naturally, they also had Jeremy’s permission to use some electricity to adjust the rooms if they wanted to—just as long as it wasn’t permanent.

Soon enough, only Dallion and Kraisten were left.

“It can’t be just love,” the large man said. “Can it?”

“Why not? Jeremy made an empire and set the entire world ablaze because he didn’t agree with Simon’s view of celibacy.”

“That was in the other world. He’s not like that here.”

You’d be surprised, Dallion thought. If anything, Jeremy was behaving like a widower with a shrine of his wife in the form of a room full of Alice in Wonderland books and paintings.

“You act as if you’re still there,” Kraisten added.

“Maybe I am,” Dallion said. “Maybe a part of me still is.”

“No. Not maybe.” The man placed his hand on Dallion’s shoulder. “And it’s more than a part. Looking at you, it’s as if you never left. I felt the same when I was banished to Dherma. I tried to continue living as best I could, hoping that she was still out there somewhere, just out of reach.”

“She’s still there.” Dallion smiled. “Simon made her a guardian against the void.”

“That little—”

“When I became the Architect, I set her free. She’s there right now. She doesn’t remember me, of course, and doesn’t remember you, but she’s there.”

Kraisten remained silent.

“When I get back, do you want me to tell her anything?”

“What’s the point?” Kraisten smiled. “I don’t exist there anymore. Although... If you make it there, and the Moons don’t create a new crater in your honor, think of something. If she knows she has a daughter, she’d know that at some point she had a husband... or something close.”

“I promise. When I get there, I’ll tell her you miss her. And I’ll also tell my mom as well.”

“I appreciate that. What about your family here? Want me to take care of that?”

“No need. I’ve made them forget. It’s better for everyone that way. As you said, I’m still in the awakened world, not in this one.”

#### Chapter 997: The Day Before the Launch

When Alien had returned, after his experience in the awakened world, he had several specific goals in mind. The main one was to quickly earn enough money and influence to protect himself from Dallion and the emperor, should they ever come after him. Using the skills he had obtained, that wasn’t particularly difficult. Anyone who’d spent decades learning to cast and create complex spells would find computer coding easy beyond belief. It was thus no issue for him to find himself a job in any prospective field. The mage’s big break, however, came when he found that he still had the ability to create echoes. They weren’t anywhere as sophisticated as the ones in the other world; even children would have been able to deal with them effortlessly. Still, the people of Earth were weaker than children.

Soon enough, Alien had a few million to spare and was also on his way to the top of the ULA. It was at that point that he whispered the idea of the moon exploration program. He knew, as everyone, that humanity had been on the moon before, and he wished it to happen again, only this time with him involved. Achieving it would almost feel like being archmage of the Academy again, and a lot easier to achieve.

Sadly, just as he was starting to gain momentum, he was issued a warning—one that only an awakened would notice. It was very subtle, but clear: don’t cause any ripples or you’ll have trouble. A few weeks of research and investigation later, Alien saw that the threat was real. An organization far stronger and wider than he could imagine was already in existence. They didn’t seem to be interested in power or to drive the world in any particular direction. The only goal of their existence was to ensure that no other awakened would. Mages, it seemed, were at the top of the list.

Since then, Alien had been forced to drop out of society, staying locked up in his own fortress of illusions, doing everything to ensure that no one unwanted would come near. With his disappearance, the drive of the moon exploration program quickly faded, left to move forward solely on inertia. In all likelihood, it seemed that it would never occur. Dates were pushed back, new concerns emerged, along with the bureaucracy that needed to be addressed. Standard flights were replaced with test flights in a never-ending process that dragged on for eternity. That was, until Dallion’s revelation was made.

The two didn’t like each other. Alien only feared the boy a bit less than the emperor himself. And yet, he could see the opportunity. The old spark that he thought extinguished years ago was now rekindled.

Emails containing music commands were sent to the appropriate people, people of significance had echoes placed within them, even a celebrity campaign emerged, creating enthusiasm for the concept of space exploration. Most importantly, all the time, everything was done subtly enough so that the watcher organization couldn’t find out.

“The watchers are fighting us for the Scotland facility,” Jenna shared with the group. “Losing the Star remains a sore spot for them.”

“That’s one way of keeping them occupied,” Dallion said as he kept examining the space suit he’d be wearing. Even after spending hours chatting with its guardian, it remained more cumbersome than he would have liked. “They’re not the problem, though.”

A short distance away, Alien and Katka were working on creating a spell that would assume control of the spacecraft once in orbit, changing its trajectory. It was a complicated process, which earned a lot of comments and criticism from Jeremy non-stop.

“You never did grasp the concept of efficiency,” the former emperor said while jogging on a treadmill nearby. “Industrial strength magnets aren’t Moonstones.”

“It’ll work, sir!” Alien grumbled beneath his breath, though still unable to make himself face the other’s gaze. “It just needs a bit more optimization,” he conceded the point.

“It better. I’ve spent a lot of money on this.”

No one mentioned the obvious threat that might come from the Blue Moon. There had been some talk on what the consequences might be should Dallion return to the awakened world, but no one had openly asked what might happen to the people that remained. They, too, knew the secret and remained entirely at Astreza’s mercy.

“Any chance I can get a better model?” Dallion asked. “No offense, suit.”

“That’s the only model!” Alien all but shouted, while readjusting dozens of magic threads. “And you better hope your firebird’s as good as you hope. You’ll only have oxygen for half the trip.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll just hold my breath.”

Dallion glanced over at Jeremy’s mobile phone on the table. It had been a while since Kraisten had called. Out of everyone, he was the only family man, so he had to do his part from New York. The saying went that no news meant good news, but in this particular case, there was reason for concern. With Jenna keeping track of the watchers, Kraisten’s job—along with Jeremy—was to be ready to counter any possible interference from Astreza. For that, he had to be in Florida for the launch.

“Any changes in the weather pattern?” Dallion asked.

“No. Everything seems good,” Jenna replied, after which she promptly checked on her phone. “Yep, nothing unexpected as far as I can see.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way for two more days.”

“I doubt that Astreza will make it so obvious,” Jeremy said. “You’ve seen him. You know he’s an in-the-last-moment kind of guy.”

Dallion didn’t say anything. He knew the Moon all too well, just as he knew that no one could defeat him unless he let them. In that respect, letting Dallion get so far could be treated as a form of

approval, although there was no guarantee. Too many people had warned him there could be consequences for there not to be.

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“I’m going to sleep.” Dallion stepped away from the spacesuit.

“What about all this?” Alien shouted. “You must learn how to cast it and—”

“I’ll learn it on the plane.”

Without further explanations, he went directly to the guest room assigned to him. Changing into a pair of pajamas, he lied down.

“Time to sleep,” he whispered and closed his eyes.

### **SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING**

The rectangle flashed, visible through Dallion’s eyelids. He ignored it, keeping his eyes shut. Every instinct urged him to open his eyes and do something. Instead, he ignored it, humming a tune aimed at making him sleepy.

Seconds passed. Dallion kept on humming until at one point, he no longer felt the need.

“Long day?” a familiar voice asked.

Instantly, Dallion opened his eyes. Eury was sitting beside him, wearing her sun gold armor. That was more than alarming.

“Why are you in armor?” Dallion asked.

“Eight years since you created the new world,” the gorgon replied. “They still mark the occasion. Early enthusiasm, I’d call it. In our time, we didn’t celebrate dates at all.”

That’s because he didn’t have the right date to celebrate. No one remembered when the world had been leveled up last, so there was no way to know when to celebrate, even if people had a reason to do so.

“I found a way back,” he said. “Everything is set. I’ll be on my way in two days. With luck, I’ll be back in a week.”

“And if you’re not lucky?”

Dallion didn’t reply. Both of them knew the alternative: continue a long-distance dream relationship. They knew it wouldn’t work, of course. Something similar had happened with Jiroh once she had returned to her world. At first, she’d pop up in their dreams for a chat quite often, asking how things were going, occasionally sharing some news of her own. With time, the visits became less and less until they stopped altogether.

“I’ll make my own luck,” Dallion said. “You just be there.”



“Where else can I go?” The snakes on Euryale’s head moved about. “There used to be horizons when we used to chat in realms,” she said, looking at the endless whiteness of the realm. There was no sun, no Moons, just fabric as far as the eye could see. “I want to do that again.”

“I will.”

Dallion was about to add more when the gorgon suddenly vanished. A moment later, so did the realm. Due to no fault of his own, Dallion was back in Jeremy’s mansion, lying on the bed.

*Had he just been ejected from the realm?*

Concentrating, he went inside again. The realm remained there, as was the guardian. Everything seemed to be in perfect order. Only Eury was missing.

“Did you do this, Astreza?” Dallion asked. “Is this your subtle way of warning me?”

No one replied.

“If you didn’t want me to try this, you could have just taken me back there.” Dallion paused. “You still can.”

It was all but certain that the Blue Moon could hear him, as it could hear everyone else on the planet. Yet, it refused to react.

“Rocket-flight it is, then. Remember, I didn’t ask for this. You did this to me, knowing that I’ll never sit still.”

That was as much an amicable conversation with a Moon that Dallion could muster right now. If there was one Moon he was thankful to, it was Felygn. If all went well, he might have a chat with him again.

*Now, time to get some actual sleep.*

The night passed in the blink of an eye. Dallion didn’t feel any calmer or more refreshed, despite having slept for over ten hours. The rest of the group seemed no different. Alien had become an open wreck to the point that even Katka was trying to calm him down. Everyone else put up a brave front, but had trouble keeping their emotions in check.

“Everything set?” Dallion asked.

“Ready when you are,” Jeremy replied. “You two can stay here if you want,” he turned to the pair of mages. “I can teach him the spell. Just don’t burn the place down or I’ll find you.”

Droplets of sweat formed on Alien’s forehead.

“I’ll be joining you, sir,” he said, almost shivering as he did.

“Oh?” Jeremy sounded amused.

“Even if this ends up being the biggest fuckup since creation, it’ll be historic. I want to be part of it, not keep hiding in some bunker. I know I’m worth crap, but I can still do something. And I want to be there.”

Slowly, Jeremy made his way up to the mage. The contrast couldn’t be more apparent if someone tried. Jeremy was the epitome of health and success. Even without his awakened powers, there was a good chance he’d succeed. While Alien would remain the geek that helped in the background.

“After all this time, you finally grew a bit of a spine,” the emperor said. “Better get ready, then. I’m not taking you on my jet smelling like that.”

With that, the final phase of the plan began. After a few final preparations, everyone was off for the meeting point in Florida. Kraisten had finally called, letting them know that he had booked a flight as well and should arrive well before the flight was scheduled. Technically, he didn’t have to be anywhere near the launchpad, although Dallion would have preferred to see him before he set off.

Aqui, Dallion thought. Do you have enough for another zap?

You want to do that now? The dragon complained.

*I can’t do anything while waiting. If I’m going to faint, better it happen now.*

*Don’t blame me if things go wrong...*

Dallion felt a sharp pain in his leg, as if an arrow had pierced his thigh. A moment later he could hear the extremely expensive bonsai tree that Jeremy had in his jet hum a tune. It was amusing, though not Dallion’s first choice. Even so, he had learned two things: he was getting better at reacting to the pain of re-learning, and also there was one skill remaining before he had the full set again.

Thanks, Aqui, he said. Get some rest. I’ll need the last one before I get to launch.

#### Chapter 998: The Weight of Magic

Security was tight with the mission under way. No civilians were allowed within the vital area of the launch pad, and there was enough security to see to that. Of course, that didn’t hold true for everyone.

“This way,” Alien said, wearing a suit that didn’t fit him in the least.

It wasn’t the clothes that mattered, but the ident badge that gave him access to everywhere within the facility. Not only that, but the authority it contained made sure that everyone had to be nice to him.

Security let them pass through with little more than a glance as the two headed to the suit-up room. There, four astronauts stood ready, dressed in space gear.

“Gentlemen,” Alien said, moving forward to shake their hands one by one.

As each of their hands came into contact with him, an echo was placed within the person—an echo that made them highly susceptible to certain suggestions. As he did, Dallion went up to the person that was closest to him in height.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll be taking it from here.”

The other nodded and sat back down. From this moment on, Dallion was going to be that person, and the echo within everyone completely agreed.

“You should be fine from here,” Alien whispered to Dallion. “Remember. You only have enough air for—”

“I know.” Dallion sighed. They had been over this one too many times for his taste. “I’ll be fine,” he lied. “Thanks, Alien. I owe you one.”

“Yeah, right,” the other laughed. “I’ll be sure to remember that.” He looked around. “I better get to mission control to handle things there.” He turned around, walking out of the room as quickly as possible.

Alright, Dallion thought. Time to go to the elevator.

“Anyone heard why they rushed the schedule?” one of the astronauts asked.

“Why else? Pentagon crap.”

“Must be a big deal. Even the usual suspects don’t know anything.”

“Yeah, getting a personal visit from the big man himself should say it all.”

Ready for the last zap, Aqui? Dallion asked mentally as the elevator went up. From there, the four were to go to a vehicle that would take them to the launch pad.

I’m not a Moon! Aquilequia grumbled. Soon!

The truth was that Dallion didn’t need to have the final skill just yet. He’d have days before he got anywhere near the moon itself. Everything was just a distraction to stop him from thinking about what was to follow.

The vehicle stopped, at which point the final trip to the capsule began. If anything was to go wrong, it would be now. To his surprise, nothing remotely alarming occurred. The weather continued to be fine. There were no sudden earthquakes or distant tsunamis—just another day perfect for launch.

Dallion walked along the access walkway, over two hundred feet above the ground. Any other day, the event would have been streamed all over the globe. Alien, however, had used his influence to persuade the powers that be to keep it low key. While undoubtedly the launch was a major event worthy of publicity, security issues always trumped everything else. The reason for this—to ensure that as few people as possible witnessed what was about to occur.

“You feeling, okay?” one of Dallion’s “fellow astronauts” asked.

Dallion just nodded best he could in the spacesuit, then picked up the pace to catch up to the other three. Although everyone was convinced he was their colleague with years of training and experience, he couldn’t allow himself to make stupid mistakes.

“Just taking one last look,” Dallion said, using his music skills to calm people down.

“I hear you,” the other astronaut laughed.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion rushed to the entrance hatch. He had done some basic training in Alien’s realm as to how to enter. Doing the real thing felt a lot more final.

“You can head back,” he said to the three others.

As he did, a bubble of void emerged around the trio, making them virtually invisible to people and equipment alike. Any observant awakened would notice a minuscule magic portal on the walkway from where void matter leaked out. The intuitive would also notice that there was a similar one in mission control, where a fashion celebrity was sitting, along with his assistant.

The celebrity had made massive contributions to NASA, it seemed, and would attract a lot more with the publicity they would bring to the mission. Naturally, no one saw any contrast between that and the new security measures that had been put in place.

“Keeping up?” Jeremy turned to Jenna.

While he had some void matter of his own, it was nowhere nearly enough to match what she was doing. For that reason, he didn’t even bother, focusing on maintaining the magic portal instead.

“It’s fine,” she nodded, even if it was apparent the exercise was sapping her strength.

“Just a few more minutes,” Jeremy whispered. “You just need to get them in the car.”

Meanwhile, Dallion closed the hatch and took his seat.

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Drawing magic from the industrial magnet he was carrying, he started casting the control override spell. In the process, he also had to be careful not to disrupt the series of illusions placed on the magnet to keep it from going amuck.

Testing, testing. Katka’s voice echoed in Dallion’s head.

Dallion smirked. As much as he wanted to reply, that would be a spell too many. All he could do was listen.

*Alien will rush the schedule some more, which means you have ten minutes once the rest of the crew are safely away.*

Dallion kept on pulling threads out of the magnet with one gloved hand while linking them to the control panel with the other. Everything had to be done according to a specific sequence or the whole thing would fail.

*If you don’t manage by then, mission control can abort the mission and you’ll have more than the Moon to worry about.*

“Very funny,” Dallion kept on working.

Katka and the old man were the observation team, keeping an eye on the wider area with hundreds of magic threads. Due to their involvement, the energy consumption from the grid had increased by eight percent. Thankfully, it was human nature to rationalize things in the most convenient way. Since there was a launch underway, people were all too quick to consider that to be the cause. If things didn't stabilize after the rocket was up, then they would start a thorough investigation. By then, it would be too late to matter.

More and more aether threads filled the cabin. Two looms hung in the air—far sloppier than any Dallion had seen made—connecting everything with everything. One of them was to act as a control module, while the other served as a screen.

“T minus three hundred.” The announcement was made.

Five minutes? That was a bit less than Dallion would have wanted. Splitting into instances, he picked up the pace.

Everything still looks good. Katka's voice resonated in Dallion's mind again. Hope it's all good on your end.

“It will be if you stop distracting me,” Dallion grumbled.

All control panels were linked at this point. All that was left was for him to add a chain of five-circle spells to several of the magic threads. One of his instances messed up, causing the spell to run wild and collapse on itself. Dallion instantly faded it, then split into a new set.

“T minus two hundred.” The countdown mercilessly went down.

Three of the five chains were complete, leaving two to go. Unfortunately, that didn't make things easier. Space was starting to become an issue, requiring Dallion to concentrate even more. Making mistakes, even while combat splitting was becoming more and more frequent.

“T minus one hundred.”

Barely was the announcement made than Dallion started work on the final spell chain. One by one, the spell circles formed, filled with intricate magic symbols.

“T minus sixty.”

The countdown had gone down to a minute now. That was good. A minute was more than enough time for him to finish. Just to be on the safe side, Dallion started checking the connections with one of his instances.

The entire cabin shook as the engines were ignited. This was his cue to lie back in his seat before the acceleration could kick in. One of the benefits of being an awakened was that he could consider that as a guideline.

“Finally got you.” Dallion's fingers stopped moving. He could barely see anything through the many magic threads, yet he didn't have to. Images appeared on one of the aether-looms, providing him all the information he needed.

You better not have messed up, Kraisten's voice boomed in Dallion's mind. On the chance that you actually finished on time, good luck. Get there in one piece and don't forget what you promised.

"You can bet on it, old man," Dallion replied, even if there wasn't anyone to hear him.

"T minus ten."

Ten seconds to spare, Dallion thought and leaned back.

"T minus five."

Four, Dallion counted. Three. Two. One.

Everything trembled as an invisible force pushed Dallion down into the seat. Choosing not to fight it, he relaxed and let things continue as they should.

Will you tip your hand, Astreza? He continued to maintain three instances.

The rocket thrust up into the air. Dallion could feel the magic of Kraisten and Katka fade away. Interestingly enough, he felt the Earth itself become more distant. It wasn't much, but the constant magic background that the planet provided was a lot fainter as well.

Was Astreza actually letting him go? Had that been the Moon's intention from the get go?

"What did you expect?" a voice asked from the seat next to Dallion.

Moments ago, the spot had been empty. Now, someone was sitting there, and not just anyone but the Blue Moon himself in the same form he'd been in during Dallion's final battle in the awakened world.

"I'm not the one who's going to stop you," Astreza remarked.

"But the secret..."

"Is still a secret. In a few minutes, all your friends will forget. The Star might remember, but she'll be a pain either way. It's not anything unexpected. I brought her here before, remember?"

Everyone would forget? Dallion thought. All this time he had been so certain that the Moon would attack them in some fashion, possibly destroying a city or two in the process. The truth was that he didn't have to. He was the world, the Moon of awakening, the person who offered people to be sent to another world to grow and defeat their demons, then made them forget all about it. Of course, he'd be able to pluck a thought from their minds.

"What about me?"

"Architect's privilege," The Moon said. "There are too few of you, so we let you do whatever you want."

“What if I decide to take over the world?”

“Will you?” Astreze tilted his head.

“No,” Dallion admitted. “But what if the next one does?”

“Why hasn’t the previous one done it? To become Architect, you have to defeat all your demons. It’s the greatest pinnacle there is—the final level of awakening. You don’t feel the need to conquer the world, because that’s not important to you anymore.”

“So, you’ll let me get back?” Dallion asked. He found the Moon’s attitude suspiciously calm.

“As I said, I’m not the one who’d stop you. You found the truth and the means on your own. You’re the master of your own life.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” The Blue Moon paused, as if a new thought had popped into his head. “I’ll have to leave you now. You’re almost too far away. Before that, let me give you one piece of advice.” He leaned closer to Dallion. “Magic also has weight.”

“Magic has weight?” Dallion asked. “What does that mean?”

Before he could get an answer, the entire control panel lit up. All lights that could flash were doing so, along with both aether-looms.

“What happened?” Dallion focused on the loom with all of his instances.

According to the readings, the energy released from the engines had changed direction. More specifically, ninety percent of the thrust kept on propelling the rocket upwards, while the rest was pushing it back down.

“Did you do this?” Dallion turned to where the Moon had been, but only found an empty seat.

#### Chapter 999: Changing Destiny

Artemis mission control was in panic, yet none of them as much as Dallion. His fingers frantically moved along the aether-looms in an attempt to find a solution to the problem. Yet, it seemed no solution could be found.

The magic of the cockpit somehow attracted part of the engine’s thrust, making it impossible for the rocket to reach orbit. Dallion remembered some random article he’d once read about energy being matter and vice versa, yet didn’t remember anything other than the headline. Even if he had, it wouldn’t be useful. The only way to stop the effect was to turn the engines off, which defeated the entire purpose.

“Rocket, can you increase the thrust?” Dallion asked.

Not a chance! The rocket replied in a geeky voice. And if I could, the forces would tear me apart. My structure needs to be at least twenty-seven percent stronger in order to withstand the pressure exerted on—

“Damn it, Astreza!”

Dallion considered entering a realm until he could figure out a plan of action. While it would give him time, it would hardly solve the issue. The only possible solution was to take one more gamble. And for it, he had to hedge his bets.

“Aqui, zap me!” he ordered.

I’m not fully ready, the dragon complained. I don’t want to waste everything and have to start from scratch.

“Do it or there won’t be a next start!”

Disapproval emanated from Dallion’s realm. He could feel that Aquilequia was against it. Her rebellious streak had chosen the worst possible time to manifest.

Fine! she said in spite of herself.

Pain pierced Dallion’s neck and back, like red-hot needles. It was a lot stronger than before—possibly the dragon overcompensating.

That’s my girl, Dallion thought, then entered the realm of the rocket.

### **SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING**

The cockpit extended, transforming into a world of steel, fire, and cables. Here and there clusters of electronic equipment rose up, like science fiction nests, thousands of lights upon them blinking non-stop. In different circumstances, Dallion would have been impressed, possibly even taken Eury on vacation here. At the moment, only one thing mattered.

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

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

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

A blue rectangle emerged.

“I want to change the land’s destiny,” Dallion said, glaring at the rectangle as if it were a living person.

Normally, that would be it. Yet, for some reason, the rectangle flickered.

“That’s right,” Dallion continued. “I’m an Architect. I have the power to change things.” He moved closer.

The flickering increased, making it resemble a television image from the eighties. A hidden battle of wills was underway as the rectangle fought to resist the change imposed on it.

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



## **Defeat the guardian to change the land's destiny.**

The text changed.

“Thanks,” Dallion allowed himself to relax.

He didn't know whether it was the distance from Earth that allowed him to achieve this feat; him having all twelve skills, or whether he had the power all along. The truth was, he didn't care in the least.

“Rocket,” he said loudly. “Do you want to go through the motions?”

Segments of three electronics “nests” rose up into the air. They were joined by large pieces of metal as they merged into the epitome of a massive science fiction robot, complete with flames shooting out of its feet.

The image was suspiciously close to the living armors Dallion had fought in the other world. He knew from experience that they were difficult to defeat, even more so now that his abilities had been reduced. Regardless, he was confident he could win. He had gone through a lot to reach this point, and he wasn't going to let a guardian stop him.

“No way I'm fighting you!” the guardian quickly said in a voice that didn't suit it in the least. “The outcome is guaranteed, either way.”

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**The ROCKET Guardian has admitted defeat.**

**Do you accept his surrender?**

It had been a while since Dallion had seen that option. It made him think of the sandstorm dragon he had fought with Gloria all that time ago.

“Thanks.” He smiled, tapping on the thumbs up rectangle underneath. “Darude.”

Bright yellow light covered the entire guardian, quickly spreading to the rest of the realm.

Dallion shielded his eyes instinctively. A moment later, he was back in the cabin—a very different cabin. The metal wasn't the standard alloy the rocket had launched with. Instead, every single ounce of it was of sky silver.

A sky silver rocket, Dallion thought.

“We did it, Aqui,” he said. The only response he got was faint snoring. No doubt Aquilequia would later deny it, but that final zap had exhausted her to the point of collapse. “You did good, girl,” Dallion added, then split into instances to check the new set of data on the aether-loom.

The percentage was pretty much the same as before. One was tempted to say that Dallion's improvement had done nothing. That was only if they ignored the fact that the overall thrust

strength had doubled. And, what was really important, the rocket had the ability to withstand the new forces without the risk of getting torn up.

“I made it,” Dallion said.

He would have liked for the rest of his group to hear, but he knew that they couldn't. By now, they had forgotten him. Likely, the entire world had forgotten that the flight ever took place. Everyone involved would remember it as a wet rehearsal or, if Astreza had a mean streak, as a catastrophic failure that had caused the ULA's test flight to explode before reaching orbit. Alien would no doubt be upset. Hopefully, there would be other times.

“Rocket,” Dallion leaned back. “Can you reach the moon on your own?”

What do you take me for? The guardian asked in outrage. Of course I can! I didn't spend years going through every test they threw at me for nothing!

“I'm sure you didn't.”

Dallion looked at the industrial magnet. Thanks to its layers of illusion, it looked like a cube of electricity floating in the cockpit. Jeremy had given assurances that it was supposed to last for several weeks. Hopefully, he was right. That still didn't prevent Dallion from being economical on oxygen usage. All he could do now was keep an eye on things and wait.

After a while, the first and second separations took place, leaving the final stage of the rocket to continue along its new trajectory. Dallion felt Earth's gravity lose its grip. There was more, though; he could feel his own magic strengthen. The magic threads hidden within the frame of the capsule became revealed. After that, solid matter itself became transparent, allowing him to see into the void of space.

Dallion looked around, admiring the sun, stars, and planets. Each of them resonated with their own magic, far brighter than any telescope could show. In-between them all, the void lurked, cold and threatening, yet not in the least aggressive. It was convinced that eventually it would consume all, so didn't bother trying to force the inevitable.

Out of curiosity, Dallion looked back. A thin purple ether bubble surrounded Earth, shielding humanity from the threats that existed between worlds. Were there human guardians dedicated to protecting it, no matter the cost? The aurora borealis existed as a phenomenon, so there was a possibility. It was also just as possible that Astreza did it all on his own. The Blue Moon had the strength, and thanks to the billions of people living and that had lived, he also had the imagination to achieve next to anything.

“See you in the other world.” Dallion closed his eyes.

Sleep came fast, bringing perfect calm for the first time since his original awakening. Now that all his fears and concerns had been swept away, Dallion could only enjoy tranquility. He didn't miss the friends and family he had on Earth, he didn't hate his former enemies, either. Their existence was acknowledged, cherished, and accepted, just as someone would accept their own past, but be aware that it was there to stay. Only the present could be shaped to forge a new future.

The first day ended in wonder. The sights made Dallion completely forget about thirst and hunger, as he watched space in admiration once he'd woken up. On the second day, his body made him know that it existed.

Space suits were constructed in a way to contain bodily fluids, though even so Dallion felt reluctant to let go. It was at the start of the third day that he finally did, to a bit of ridicule from the suit's guardian. Apparently, Jeremy had taken the trouble of educating the guardian back on Earth by repeatedly explaining the organic process. He had also made sure to share a large number of jokes and comments on the matter.

*Serves me for sleeping before the launch,*

Dallion grumbled to himself. It didn't help that he'd also admitted being able to talk to guardians. Seems even without his memory, the emperor had managed to get the last laugh.

Almost there, the rocket said as the third day neared its end. Where exactly do you want to land?

"The dark side," Dallion said. "On the east coast of the Ocean of Storms."

*East coast? That's oddly specific.*

"I know."

*I'll need a bit more thrust to get the right trajectory.*

Dallion's fingers moved along the second aether-loom, transferring a jolt of energy from the industrial magnet to the respective course correction thrusters.

"Is that enough?"

This is a continuous process, the guardian grumbled. I'm aware that you're not a genius, unlike me, but understand this. I need to make millions of minute adjustments every second.

"Just tell me when you need more and you'll have it."

Generations of artists and poets had spent their lives creating masterpieces dedicated to the moon. What they couldn't know was that up close, it didn't seem nearly as glamorous. Even from this distance, it looked like nothing more than one giant rock covered in craters and dust. There was no way that the world Dallion had roamed could be this, but it didn't have to. Just because everyone considered that reality to be the "real world" didn't mean they were right.

The greatest trick the Eighth Moon had pulled was to create that perfect illusion in everyone's mind. In truth, only the Seven Moons had the power to place people there. That was why they could just as easily eject people that broke their vows; that was also why no time passed between the moment an awakened joined and when they left.

The rocket got closer and closer to the lunar surface, letting Dallion see the ludicrous amounts of magic it contained. There were more magic threads than Earth could ever have—enough to create its own universe.

A question came to mind: was the Earth really the planet that the moon had been orbiting, or had it been summoned later? Earth history claimed it to have been created after an object had collided

with the planet, but Dallion was certain that the remaining six worlds had just as compelling explanations. The most mind boggling bit was that all of them were correct.

The landing won't be pretty, the rocket said as they approached the designated landing site.

"Don't worry about me," Dallion started casting a new spell. His internal magic had grown to the point that he no longer needed to exclusively rely on the magnet. "Will you be alright?"

After my latest improvements, I can slam nose-first and will be fine. The guardian laughed. It's the surface that has to worry about itself.

"Somehow, I'm sure it'll be fine."

Dallion readied himself mentally. He'd have a small window of opportunity to get out of the capsule and come into contact with the lunar surface. That meant he'd need to make a tear in his suit—a slightly unnerving thought.

"Try to come in smoothly," he began. "I don't—"

## **TRUE AWAKENING**

Chapter 1000: Of a Thousand Instances

Everything froze still. Instinctively, Dallion tried to reach out and shatter the yellow rectangle that remained in front of his face. Unlike every time in the past, the rectangle felt hard and solid.

That's new, Dallion thought as the rectangle floated backwards.

"Rocket, are you okay?" he asked.

The guardian didn't reply.

"Aqui?"

There was no response from the dragon, either.

Reaching out, Dallion grabbed hold of the yellow rectangle.

"Do your thing, Nox." He looked at the glowing shape.

It remained completely whole. Clearly, whatever had stopped time, had only allowed him to keep moving. Another interesting fact was gravity, or rather its return. Dallion felt he was being pulled into the seat, though not in the crushing way like during launch.

That wasn't all that had returned. Using his magic vision, he could see a thick layer of magic outside the capsule. It had spread everywhere, covering it like thick syrup. Strangely enough, that's where it stopped, as if forbidden to leak inside.

That's new. Using some of his internal magic, Dallion cast a three-circle opening spell. Eventually, the hatch swung open, revealing an endlessness of orange threads. If Dallion didn't know better, he'd have thought he had somehow found

himself close to the sun. There was no heat coming from outside, although with his spacesuit Dallion couldn't tell for certain.

As he sat there, the hatch moved away on its own. Someone was inviting Dallion to step outside.

It's not like you're giving me any choice, Dallion thought, then cast a flight spell on himself and split into three instances.

Ready for anything, Dallion floated through the opening. The orange threads of magic were endless, flowing around the capsule like strands of honey. A short distance away, floating in the nothingness just like him, was a female figure wearing a glowing yellow robe. Her features appeared human, but at the same time didn't. Long yellow hair flowed down her slender shoulders, reaching all the way to her ankles.

"Hello, Dal," she said. "It's nice to see you face to face at last."

"You're the Eighth Moon," Dallion said, aware of the significance of his statement.

"You can call me Luna." The woman smiled.

"Luna?"

"It's a name you're used to. A lot better than 'Eighth Moon'."

She probably was going by human naming conventions. Even so, Luna was better, indeed.

"I'm surprised you made it here."

"You didn't think I'd manage?" Dallion floated a few feet closer.

"No one is supposed to make it here. No awakened, at least. The girl came close, but even she just passed by. Astreza was furious, of course, but then again, he was always the most protective of me."

Maybe the Star's use of void matter had something to do with it, Dallion thought.

"You know why I've come," Dallion quickly said, remembering that Moons could read thoughts.

"Yes. You want to become part of the world's life again."

"I want to become part of Eury's life," Dallion corrected. "I can live with no one else knowing who I am."

"Really?" Luna seemed surprised. "Why would you?"

"Are you offering to restore everyone's memories of me?"

"Oh, Dal." The woman shook her head. "All that traveling and leveling up and you still haven't realized the key element."

Luna snapped her fingers. Part of the orange threads moved to the side, revealing the awakened world. It was a lot closer than Dallion imagined, providing a clear view of a massive city. Some might say it was the largest city in the world, and one Dallion could recognize.

“Alliance...” he whispered.

It had changed considerably, becoming a bit wider and a lot taller. The architecture style was a lot more artistic, almost as if they were approaching the equivalent of the human Renaissance.

“Didn’t you ever wonder why you had memories of the time before your awakening?” Luna asked.

“Because I took the consciousness of someone who was born there,” he replied without a moment’s thought.

“Two Dallions?” Luna tilted her head. “Physically identical and sharing the same name? Or do you think that every person in the seven worlds has a copy here? The truth is that there was just you. Everyone else was nothing more than a memory.”

“There never was a Dallion in the awakened world?” How could that be? Dallion could clearly remember his childhood—his non-Earthly childhood. His crush on Gloria, him being bullied by Veil and others... him growing up along with his parents, and later his brother Linner. All that had to be real.

“There only ever was one Dallion.” The woman pointed at him. “You. After your talk with Astreza, when you broke through your first barrier, you brought your past along with you.” She paused. “Actually, no. That’s not correct. A past was created for you based on your aspirations, fears, and shortcomings.”

*My entire past was just a memory?*

“The past is always just memories—memories for the world. The things that happened before your awakening actually happened; they were just added after the fact. If one were to destroy a castle in their past, a castle would be destroyed to accommodate, at which point the memory would become reality.”

“But only as long as I’m within the realm,” Dallion said bitterly.

“Or after it as well. The guardians of the world make that choice. Just as they create memories for people upon entering, they might choose to erase them after they leave. That’s what rules are for.”

And also the reason everyone, even Star cultists and the physical embodiment of the void abided by those rules. No one wanted to be ejected from the world without a trace.

“Architects are the sole exception,” Luna continued. “When leveling up reality itself, you can no longer remain part of it. The more philosophical would say that the creator couldn’t be his own creation.”

“Why?” Dallion looked her in the eyes. “Why go through all the trouble of creating fake realities and filling them with people that have false memories?”

“False?” Confusion covered Luna’s expression. “They aren’t false. They are just created so you can exist in the world. Your old memories remain.”

Yet, there was no telling how real those were, either. If there was one example of a person’s past being created, why shouldn’t the same be true for all other aspects of life? Had Dallion actually agreed to his awakening? Had he really applied to college? Did he even exist?

Clusters of doubt filled his body. Was Euryale a lie as well? No. She had to be real. Everything they’d been through, all their experiences, weren’t just some collage of events. If they were fake, Dallion wouldn’t have gotten here, far less have this conversation.

“That’s right.” The woman nodded. “That’s precisely why we bring you here. In my world, I and the Moons can recreate anything, but we can do just that. We are incapable of developing on our own. Without new memories and experiences to pour in, there’s nothing that could be built. This place will remain a rock, waiting for others to set foot on it in the hopes that one day it would become something more.”

“You can’t level up.”

The notion was amusing in its absurdity. This whole push for people to defeat their fears and become the strongest in the world was for the Moons’ benefit, as it was for the people involved. No! The Moons relied on it far more than anyone else. Without Architects this place would remain as it had always been—one static scene of which even the participants would eventually lose interest.

“You need me,” Dallion noted, calm returning to his being. “Not just Architects, but people to make everything happen.”

“When the old races inhabited my world, I was confident that they would help me grow. When they stopped and united against me instead, I had no choice but to banish them. It wasn’t because I wanted to, it wasn’t because I was upset. Without growing, I had no reason for being.”

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“And then you cast a spell.”

It must have been the greatest spell of all time. To achieve what she had, Luna must have split into millions, possibly billions, of instances and, in those instances, chosen seven worlds to help her grow. Each world would be responsible for bringing in otherworlders and through them helping the world grow, while she entered a long state of sleep to regain a fraction of her former strength. In all likelihood, she’d never be able to return to what she was, only occasionally freezing time, revealing herself for a fraction of a moment.

That was why she had made the effort to greet Dallion—to explain the power he held. He wouldn’t be allowed to take over the world; the Seven Moons wouldn’t allow it, and despite everything, he’d never be able to defeat them in a direct fight. However, he still had the gift of creation. With a single

thought, he could change the history of the world and transform himself into a noble emperor, leader of a new Order, or just an ordinary hunter to spend the rest of his days with his wife in the wilderness. He could do all that and so much more, and the awakened world would accept it.

“I see you get it.” Luna covered the view of Alliance with her magic threads. “You’ll still have to get down there,” she added. “Right now, you’re ten seconds from crashing into the wild forest a day’s flight from the world’s greatest city.”

“Is Eury there?”

“No. You’ll have to find her on your own. With your skills, that would hardly be difficult. I’d give it a week at most. Still, if you need help, you can always ask one of the Seven Moons.”

“I think I prefer to manage on my own,” Dallion replied. “No offense.”

“I understand.”

“It was nice talking to you. I didn’t think I ever would.”

“Maybe there will be other opportunities.” Glowing yellow particles started flowing off of Luna’s figure. “The chances are small, but one can hope...” she continued to fade away, becoming one with the magic threads.

“Time will tell.” Dallion turned around, floating towards the capsule. “Just one thing.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Everyone else lost the will to return the moment they returned to their world. Why am I different?”

“Why?” Luna sighed. “You were always meant to return, for the same reason Euryale didn’t forget you. Both of you are in each other’s world as well as their own. You had no choice but to return.”

“The aria.” Dallion laughed internally. When the creature had emerged from the stone orchid, it had linked both of them together, making them part of each other’s memories. There was no way of telling whether that was a coincidence born purely out of the dedication and strife Dallion had put in order to make Euryale his wife or Felygn had tipped the scales in his favor just a bit. Dallion would never know. All that mattered now was that after eight years, they would finally be reunited once more.

\* \* \*

It was said that after purging out the void and bringing all races back from banishment, the Architect vanished from the world. Not a single soul, even the great emperors, could remember who he was or what he looked like. Yet, they remembered his deeds. Thus, with the Moons’ blessings, each of them decreed that everyone in their domains would live their life as he had: caring, generous, helping human, plant, animal and guardian alike; and in doing so, the great age of the world would continue forever.



Yet just as poetic sagas, historical accounts, and philosophical tomes were written on the matter, rumors spread through the awakened. According to some, it was said that the Architect had secretly returned on a tower of sky silver, ready to accept the challenge of anyone who manages to find him. Should the challengers prove strong or otherwise pique his interest, the Architect would make them his disciples and teach them all the skills he kept hidden from the world.

The rumors were denied and ridiculed by all the rulers, of course, but that didn't keep awakened from trying, as they had been in secret ever since the start of the new age.

"It must be in the ocean," a muscular woman whispered in the Ice Hunter's tavern. "That's the only place it could remain hidden."

"Nymphs have been roaming that place for years," the dryad innkeeper replied in a level voice. That was one of the downsides of running a tavern in the wilderness. Every few weeks, some new awakened would come with a new theory just as bad as all the ones before. "And it can't be on the mountains, either. The furies would have noticed."

"No! It's the ocean," the woman insisted. "I know of three groups that have gone searching, and all ended up missing."

"Under strange circumstances, I'm sure," the innkeeper sighed. "So, how much provisions will you want?"

"One week's worth."

"One week?" The dryad scratched his ear. "That might take a day. Two if you want meat."

The woman hesitated. Speed was of the essence. Yet she didn't want to spend the next week eating only bread and fruit.

"Two days is fine."

"Great. Choose a tree to sleep in outside. Payment after I get them for you."

With a grunt, the woman nodded, then quickly left. At the entrance, she almost ran into another patron of the establishment.

Without skipping a beat, the new arrival split into a dozen instances, passing by the massive woman as if she weren't there. The execution was elegant to the point that every hunter in the room split into instances as well, if only to see it happen.

"Newbies," the dryad tossed a flask to the newcomer. "Can't even split, but have set off for the architect's tower."

"You never know." The newcomer opened the flask and took a gulp. "Maybe she'll get lucky."

"If I'd gotten a coin for each time someone said that, I'd be a very rich man."

“You are a very rich man, Vihrogon,” the other smiled. “If you wanted, you could be living in a palace.”

“My place is here,” the dryad laughed. “After everything, I’ve deserved a bit of calm and quiet. And what about you, Dal? No desire to seek out the Architect? That sounds like something you’d like.”

Dallion smiled. He’d only been back a few days, and his own friend never even knew he was gone. It was better that way, of course. Dallion didn’t want to take on the role of Architect, but he didn’t want to remain forgotten forever. So, a new world memory was created.

“I heard Eury’s been hanging out here. Has she?”

“Funny thing.” The dryad smiled. “She asked me the same thing as well. Anything I should know about?”

“If there was anything to tell, you’d be the last person I’d share it with.” Dallion shook his head.

“That hurt. And after all the times I saved your life.”

“All the times you couldn’t keep your mouth shut, you mean.” Dallion took another gulp from the flask, then tossed it back. “Seriously, when was she here?” Just for good measure, Dallion added a subtle nudge using his music skills.

“You’re no fun. She’s on top of some tree nearby.” Vihrogon put the flask away. “Watching the sunset. She’ll probably be back in an hour or so. You can wait.”

“I prefer to go and find her.”

“Of course you would. Oh, your brother became a hunter’s apprentice. He told me not to tell you, but...”

“And you wonder why I don’t share secrets with you anymore.”

Dallion knew exactly what had happened, of course. His brother had remained non-awakened, yet it was that quality of his that made him ideal for tracking. As long as he was careful, magical animals were unable to sense him. Not even Dallion knew the nature of this unusual gift, but had made sure that a hunter would give him the same chance that Eury had given him at the time.

“Tell her to catch some food. Lots of people have been passing through, so I could use the goods.”

With a single wave, Dallion left the tavern. The moment he did, he instantly leaped up into the air, casting a flight spell in the process. Within moments he emerged above the crowns of the trees of the thousand-foot forest and burst into a hundred instances.

Each looked in a different direction, searching for the magic threads of a gorgon. Then he found it.

“Eury,” Dallion whispered. All but one of his instances collapsed. Feeling his pulse quicken, Dallion darted in the air, stopping a few feet from the gorgon.

Euryale remained as she was, facing the setting sun. The snakes on her head moved about gently. Dallion knew perfectly well that she had seen him; he also knew that it was up to him to make the first move.

“I could change it for you,” he said, taking a seat in the air next to her. “The color of the sunset, I mean.”

“It’s fine as it is,” Eury replied.

Dallion nodded. It had been so long since they’d been apart—far longer for her than for him—and yet now that they were together, none felt the need to say anything. It was as if they had always been together, just not in the same physical space.

“You changed the world’s history,” she said. “It seems I’m no longer the wife of the Architect.”

“You’ll always be my wife.” He took hold of her hand. “People don’t need to know the rest.”

The gorgon smiled.

“Your grandmother moved back to Dherma. She’s taken over matters there.”

“As expected. I’ll go see her. I promised Kraisten to tell her a few words for him.”

And you always keep your promises, Dallion heard Eury’s thoughts.

“How was it there?” she asked. “I saw glimpses, but it seemed too strange.”

“It is strange. Very, very strange and boring.”

She’d find it interesting. Despite everything, awakened had made use of their skills and humanity’s technology to create something this world never would. Should they go there? She’d probably like that, although being a gorgon in a world of mortals wasn’t a good idea.

“Are you able to show me more?” she asked. “For some reason, I feel I miss it.”

The question had caught Dallion by surprise. Upon returning, he had made sure to weave himself into the memory of the world in such a way as to know exactly what the consequences would be. And still, he hadn’t foreseen this reaction.

Even now, the aria shared their thoughts. Just as Dallion had spent months trying to return to the awakened world for Eury, the gorgon has spent years wanting to go to Earth for him. In that time, she had grown both curious and accustomed to the world to such a degree that she felt it closer than the awakened world.

“Miss it...” Dallion repeated, placing his other hand on Euryale’s head.

The snakes moved a bit, unused to the sensation, then quickly relaxed.

“You won’t miss it,” Dallion concentrated.

## **MEMORY FORGING INITIATED**

Realities of two worlds merged in one like a giant tree, leaving Dallion with the power to prune them. Faster than human thought, his fingers moved throughout the leaves, peeling off leaves and branches only to reattach them elsewhere. Unseen and unfelt by anyone, a new history was being sculpted, one that everyone would remember moments from now. There would be no sadness or regret, only possibilities.

Plucking the final leaf, Dallion removed his hand from Euryale's head. The moment he did, locks of golden-brown hair fell down, covering the rest of her head.

Eury opened the eyes on her face, looking down at her hands: human hands, with the same pinkish complexion that Dallion had. Her panoramic sight hadn't been impaired, but she could no longer consider herself a gorgon, at least temporarily. But most importantly, it wasn't Dallion that had caused her to change; he had merely given her the ability to do it herself.

"You won't miss it," Dallion said. "Because I'll take you there." He embraced her tightly. From here on, not even the Moons would ever keep them separated again. "There and to every other world you want to see."