

Leveling up 231

Chapter 231: The Path Onward

All but four members of the Icepicker guild passed the initial trial. As it turned out, anyone who managed to improve three or more of the presented items was allowed to continue to the next round. In fact, a large number had failed to fully mend the rusty item, making Dallion and a few others the exceptions to the rule. Ironically, that only made things more difficult for him. According to Bel, who had relatives pass through this, the overachievers were always pitted against each other in the preliminary rounds, while the rest were paired amongst each other. Given that there were no particular benefits being first, most of the applicants preferred to hide their strength and do the minimum necessary to reach the real rounds.

However, Dallion didn't feel cheated in the least. If anything, he was glad to test himself against other strong awakened. There was a thrill to it all, a desire that had sparked deep inside, like a gen flowing in a pool of water now that most of the much of his flaws had been removed. That only further inspired him to go through his next level up.

That might be so, but just be careful not to overcompensate by rushing forward blindly. Recklessness isn't a solution. You don't want to go back to the problems you had when you first came here.

I know. I'll be cautiously reckless now.

The annoyed grumble suggested that Nil didn't appreciate the joke.

By the time Dallion got back to the Gremlins Timepiece, customers had already started to gather, despite it being still afternoon. Word of the inns performance had reached most of the city, even bringing in the occasional wealthy patron. Some of the people had a similar air to the general. Thankfully, that one had undertaken any additional actions to get Dallion to explore his items. As much as Dallion hated the thought, more and more it was looking like he'd have to do that on his own accord if he wanted to get his hands on a copyette-finding artefact. The prospect wasn't an enjoyable one.

What cat died for you to be here so early? Hannah asked with her typical tact as she passed by, carrying several crates of supplies to the kitchen.

I just finished all my chores, Dallion replied with a smile. Let me help you.

Nope. Hannah instantly pulled away as Dallion reached to lighten her load. I got this. If anyone should be helping me it's Aspan, that lazy imp.

The innkeepers reluctance to receive help was quickly sensed and noted by Dallion, who calmly took a step back. To each their own, as his mother back on Earth would say.

Have you seen the Luors? Hannah asked as she vanished into the kitchen. Would have been nice to have them here about now.

I've no idea where they are, Dallion said, even if he had his suspicions. More than likely Dallion was going about being an attention magnet and Gloria was at her secret theatre, raining. I can serve the customers instead.

Its not about that, Hannahs muffled voice came through the kitchen door, followed almost immediately by an argument with Aspan. At times, Dallion had no idea how the two managed to run a business together. It was a real miracle wrapped in a mystery within a paradox. Im sure theyll be here by shift time.

Good, someone whispered over Dallions shoulder, making him instinctively split into two instances and turn around. In each of the cases, though, he saw the exact same thing.

Jiroh? he asked, almost in disbelief.

How are you, Dal? The fury smiled. I hear youve been holding down the fort while Ive been gone.

The fury looked the same she always had, even wearing her usual non-adventure outfit. It was almost as if she had never left. In truth, she had been gone for weeks, far more if Dallion counted true time. Seeing her brought a flood of memories back, as if a dear friend had returned. Actually, she was just that. If it wasnt for her, Dallion would never have joined the Icepicker guild or gotten his harpsisword back. Also, he wouldnt have met Eury.

You definitely have grown a lot since Ive been gone, Jiroh said. Hannah, is it okay if we have a drink before work starts? the fury yelled.

Just dont take too long! came the reply.

I take that as a yes, Jiroh winked. Pick a table, Ill get the drinks.

In less than a second she had gone and returned, holding a large pitcher of lemonade and two glasses. Meanwhile, Dallion had just taken a step to the nearest table in the inn.

So, tell me. What sort of trouble have you gotten yourself into while I was gone? Jiroh placed the pitcher and glasses on the table. At that point, Dallion used his increased reflexes to pour her a glass, then one to himself.

This and that, he replied, then took a sip of his drink. The lemonade was cool and perfect, the way just Aspan could make it. Apart from the expected flavors, Dallion could taste the bouquet of spices that made the drink better than a five-star cocktail. I learned a few skills, had a fight with the Star
The comment made Jiroh tense up slightly. As a hunter, she had dealt with plenty of creatures that had been created or corrupted by the star as well.

Im also going out with Eury now, he added. A touch of guilt passed through him as he said that. It had been Jiroh who had first introduced them to each other.

Really? Genuine surprise emanated from her. Who would have guessed.

Yeah. What can I say? Sometimes things just happen. What about you? Did the hunt go well?

Okay, not as good as I hoped. Maybe next time Ill be luckier.

Job went bad?

Oh, the job went well. I just didnt find what I was searching for. As they say another dead end. But lets talk of happier things.

Two of my friends from Dherma came visiting, Dallion changed the subject. Theyre actually staying here. Hannah got them to work for the inn as well.

Both Jiroh and Dallion paused, expecting another yell from the kitchen. This time, the innkeeper didnt have a reaction. Possibly, her discussion with Aspan had made her miss the comment.

The pure blonds. The fury nodded. Hannah told me about them. I guess Ill see them during the evening shift.

Theyll be ecstatic. Theyve been wanting to meet you ever since Hannah mentioned you were a hunter. Apparently being a hunter is a pretty big deal.

Yeah, I guess it is.

Whats a thunder fury?

Where did you hear that? On the surface, there didnt seem to be any change on Jiroh. She remained calm, even smiling slightly, casually leaning back as if nothing had happened. However, Dallions music skills let him notice the momentary concern that sparked throughout her like a thunderbolt, before vanishing just as fast.

One of the generals furies mentioned it. You remember who the general was?

Yeah, I remember The fury gulped down her drink, then poured a new glass. Its something some furies are born with, she whispered in a way that only Dallion could hear. Some say that makes them dangerous.

Does it?

Depends on the circumstances. Could be for enemies.

In that case, Ill need your help, Dallion whispered back. Even if she didnt seem to be an awakened, he had found that her perception was almost as good as Eurys. Theres a copyette on the loose. I can tell you the details, but in short

I know. Jiroh interrupted. Eury told me. And no, I dont know more than her on the matter, nor can I find you a trinket. Everything we brought from the wilderness has already been sold. Not that it would have helped you much. The things we set out to get were very different.

Its not items that I want. I need your help. Ive only seen a copyette twice during my awakening trials. I have no idea how dangerous they are in the wild, but enough people seem to think they are. Including the Star.

Are you sure?

No.

Nothing was certain with the Star. As far as Dallion knew, everything could have been one giant act, but there had been a moment during which he had seen real fear in Arthurows back when they had come across the copyette in the dagger. It was the only case in which Dallion had seen the Star act in such extreme fashion. Or maybe the copyette on the loose wasnt just an ordinary copyette?

But I think he was.

Must have been someone quite powerful to get such a reaction. Jiroh took another sip of her lemonade. Or maybe he had something that was.

An item?

Or directions to one. Copyettes were the first race to be imprisoned. Many of the artifacts we come across in the wilderness were probably made by them. If theres something out there that could harm the Star, it could harm anyone beneath the Moons.

A weapon that was the equivalent of an atomic bomb. No wonder the Star wanted it, and that meant that he wasnt supposed to get it ever.

Ill take care of that. You she pointed at Dallions forehead focus on the lesser things and dont get involved.

What if I find the copyette before you?

Dont face it. You dont have the skills to win yet.

The conversation with Jiroh continued for a few minutes more. The heavy stuff resolved, they talked about more casual matters. For a moment, it was like Dallions first days in Nerosal, when he was so green and naive that hed constantly get in trouble. Somehow that seemed like a much more innocent time, before he had experienced the effect the Star had on the world, as well as seen the dark underbelly of the cities.

Once the conversation was done, Jiroh went to the kitchen probably to end the argument that had been going on between Hannah and Aspan for the last ten minutes. In turn, Dallion went to his room and prepared mentally for a few minutes. While he wasnt as reluctant to level up as before, he was fully aware of how difficult each level was.

Darude, he whispered.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The awakening room appeared around him. It had changed somewhat after Gens rearrangement. All forging tools with the exception of the hammer were gone, transferred to the first paradox cube room. At some point Dallion was going to have to decide what he wanted the remaining two challenge rooms. Until then, Gen had transformed one into his own personal bedroom, and the other into Luxs home. The firebird hadnt been in the least impressed, preferring to spend more time pestering Nox in his domain. The crackling, on the other hand, had started spending more of his time sleeping. Clearly, he was growing up.

Dont worry, a melody of sounds merged into words. Ill always be with you.

I know, Harp, Dallion said. I guess Im just feeling somewhat anxious. Youve fought copyettes before, right?

A few.

When I pass my next gate, will I be strong enough to fight one?

Yes, but not alone.

That was pleasantly encouraging. Dallion already had a lot of good gear, not to mention two very reliable familiars. And finally, more and more awakened were becoming his friends. That, too, would be useful when the time came.

Youll have to make a deal, the haprsisword said, using her music. I know you dont like it, but youll need to get a kaleidervisto from the general.

Maybe. But first I need to face my fears once more. Dallion went into the corridor. As expected, a new door had appeared on the wall.

Chapter 232: Water

You are in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your destiny.

Yeah, yeah. Dallion shattered the rectangle as he entered the room.

Unlike before, he didnt seem particularly worried. If anything, he was impatient to get this over with so he could focus on his real worries, namely the copyette in the city. While there was no evidence, his gut told him that there was a connection between it and the Star. What that connection was, he could only speculate. Having a talk with the mirror pool would be nice although he knew quite a few people would disapprove. Their opinions on the matter had a lot of weight, but at the end of the day, they werent living his life.

The corridor seemed to widen the further Dallion went. A few hundred feet in, the torches on the walls were so far that they were like flickering lights in the distance. Looking up, Dallion could see more of them on the ceiling, forming a dimly lit dome.

Any idea what this is, Nil? Or is that an area you arent familiar with as well?

Dallion didnt bother answering. So far, he had held enough battles in dome-shaped arenas to be fairly certain that he had no dark secret relating to domes. Still, it would have been nice if the room

gave him a hint so he could somewhat prepare. Thinking logically, the first challenge had been against himself, the second, against the mental image of his grandfather, and the third Well, the third was a bit too fresh in his mind to forget. Maybe he was going to face his mother after all? She was skilled in music, so it was going to be a difficult fight. Or maybe it was going to be something completely different?

Focusing, Dallion formed an echo of himself a few steps away. The effort was slightly greater than combat splitting, but in this instance, this seemed to be more useful.

Well need a few more to explore the entire place, the echo said. Even if you he paused, then crossed his arms. Great. You're sending me forward. Why am I not surprised?

Dallion smirked. He could see the echo had taken his snarkiness to the extreme. Still, there were no hard feelings as he said that. And to be perfectly honest, it was a bit nasty, making an echo just to check the way forward. From what Dallion remembered, scouts used this method while in the realms to explore vast territories in the least amount of time. There were several scrolls in the ring library dealing with that. Dallion had tried reading a few in order to prepare for his world expedition, but the slow, boring pace of the scroll had made him stop after half.

Just the tunnel going on and on, the echo shouted from ahead. I think its starting to shrink again.

That was interesting, although not as interesting as the complete lack of enemies. Normally, something should have happened about now.

The firebird chirped, then appeared next to him moments later.

Lux Dallion sighed. When I said that, I didnt mean for you to come here. You were supposed to

The firebird looked at him, confused, tilting its head to the side. Even with his music skills, Dallion couldnt be certain if the familiar wasnt doing that on purpose. For some reason familiar emotions were difficult to see, especially Noxs lately.

Just stay there and be ready, okay?

The firebird chirped, moving slightly higher in the air.

Yep, the tunnel is definitely getting smaller, the echo shouted. I think I can see the end.

Whats there?

Nothing. Just an empty wall.

An empty wall. Maybe that was the test? Dallion remembered that when he had unsealed the awakened powers of his mother, he had to rely on Nox to make cracks within a wall. It was very likely the same to be in effect here.

The wall looks pretty solid, the echo shouted. Want me to come back?

No, stay there! Dallion yelled, even if he didnt have to. Ill come to you. Eagerly, he marched forward.

On the fifth step he took, everything around him suddenly changed. Dallion had less than a moment to sense the flood change into water, almost pulling him down as he stood on it. In that instant, the mental fortress of calm that he had built shattered, as panic seeped through.

Water Why did it have to be water?

Even worse, why hadn't he taken the opportunity to learn proper swimming since the first mirror pool incident? Practically, there was no excuse. He had seen the amount of time his improved body allowed him to hold his breath. The amount of time had to have further increased since then. His perception allowed him to see everything beneath the surface as if it were air and still he hadn't bothered to do the simplest thing simply because he didn't think he'd even need it.

For a few seconds Dallion remained still, almost frozen, as the silence went through his mind, letting the surface move further away. It was like watching a helium balloon go up and up towards the sky. Shortly after, the next phase of panic kicked in, forcing Dallion's body to move on its own, as he desperately tried to grab the fleeing surface.

You need to be calm

In part, Dallion knew that. However, at the same time, he did not. It seemed too real to him, so real that everything that he had learned since he had arrived in Nerosal, all the skills and improvements vanished like smoke in the night.

Desperation kept him struggling as he went down, not once managing to coordinate anything close to actual swimming, as if sheer will alone would be able to propel him forward.

The nymphs words fell on deaf ears. Struggling in a battle against himself, Dallion seemed to do everything in his power to make life more difficult for himself. Then suddenly, the water around him disappeared, letting him fall on a stone floor.

It took several seconds for Dallion's body to catch on and end its attempts to swim through air. When it did, confusion kicked in.

Where am I? Dallion wondered.

Slowly, he stood up and looked around.

The room was very similar to the first room he had once he had come here. There were doors or windows, nothing but grey walls. As he took a step forward, a red rectangle appeared without warning.

You are Level 16

Okay. Dallion gently tapped it. The rectangle disappeared and a new one formed in its place.

You have failed to defeat your fears.

You wont be able to shape your destiny for another 24:00.

As Dallion looked, the counter started counting down.

Look on the bright side, Gens voice came from a few steps behind. At least you get to try again in a day if you want to.

Huh? Dallion turned around briskly. What are you doing here?

The wall

Greeting you, apparently. Didnt know about this place, though. Guess it is the room of failure.

Close, Nil walked in from where one of the walls used to be. You can call this the heart of the realmthe very first room that was created upon awakening. Usually, you get thrown back there when you mess up in the awakening realm. The medallion leaves you a way out.

As the echo spoke, the walls of the room disappeared one by one, revealing the initial awakening room.

It had been quite a while since Dallion had failed. The experience was unlike all previous times. He wasnt thrown out in the real world, for one thing. Then again, there was the humiliating experience of failing due to drowning. That definitely wasnt something hed share with anyone.

You dont have anything to be ashamed about, dear boy. Nil said with a polite smile. Leveling up faces you with issues that you havent resolved yet. No matter the appearance, they are things you might not be ready for yet.

Nil, I drowned in a pool of water

Not something Id advertise, thats for sure, but at least you know not to do so in future, correct?

That was definitely one way of looking at it. Maybe that was a hint not to get involved with the mirror pool? If everything in the awakened realm was metaphor, maybe the body of water was the representation of the organization and Dallion falling to the bottom meant he was in too deep? Or maybe he was overthinking things.

Still, I would suggest a bit of real-life practice before your next attempt? the echo said, arching his brows. Just a suggestion.

You know what, I might do that, Dallion walked right past him and gen. Give me just a minute, I need to check something.

Without explanation, he went out of the room and into the corridor. The door was still there, only this time, there was a large padlock on it. It wasnt the place Dallion wanted to go, though. Turning to his right, he continued along the other side of the corridor, until he reached the harpsiswords domain.

The sun had already set, replaced by the seven moons. The clean skies for a moment made Dallion feel as if he were in space. A cool breeze passed through him, washing all his troubles away, making him wonder why he didnt spend more time here.

Harp? Dallion said, looking at the top of the nymphs tower.

A blue light appeared, inviting him to go up. Just as Dallion was about to, a familiar chirp came from the air beside him.

Not now, Lux, Dallion said as he petted the firebird. I want to have a few words alone.

The familiar was visibly sad at the response, but even so flapped its wings, disappearing from the realm in a flash. Waiting a few more seconds, Dallion then made his way to the top of the tower. The nymph was there, as always, only this time her harp was gone, replaced by a fireplace made of water. Blue flames let out a pleasant glow, though without creating any heat.

The sea is breaking up tonight, the flame vibrated, conveying the nymphs words.

Ill take your work for it. Dallion didnt even look.

You shouldnt.

Because I must be ready to deal with things on my own. I know. I have just one question, though. You could have helped me pass the trial. Same as you did during the sanitation job.

The nymph said nothing.

Im not here to ask why you didnt help me level up. Im here to learn why you let me win last time. I could never defeat you in a normal fight, even with Lux and Nox. You and Nil were quite convincing, but I think there was more to that test than what you said.

Possibly. Its not for you to know, though. Not yet.

Is that everyones answer for everything?

There was another long pause. The guardian looked at Dallion.

The skill was a gift left there for you, she replied through the water flames. I was just a way for you to find it.

So the trial was fake?

No. The trial was real, but the skill you acquired had nothing to do with it. The flaw you held was that you were starting to rely on me too much. I had to put a stop to that early on.

That made some sense in a strangely weird way.

Who left the gift for me? Dallion asked.

I cant tell you.

Why not?

Because the Moons wont allow it.

Chapter 233: Future Rival

You know, you look pretty stupid, a large man said, looking at Dallion in the lake.

There was no denying he had a point. After close to half an hour of hesitation, Dallion had finally entered the shallow part of the lake, and was attempting to keep afloat in a spot where ducks couldnt swim without their feet touching the bottom. The amount of pressure on Dallions face would make anyone think that he had been swimming through an ocean with a pair of anvils on his back.

Losing his concentration, Dallion let himself sink to the bottom of the lake, then pushed himself up with his arms so as to see the person who had addressed him. The features seemed somewhat

familiar, but Dallion couldn't place him that was, until he saw the Flameforge emblem hanging from the man's neck.

Mord? he asked.

Took you a while, the other replied, his voice ringing with confidence.

The last time the two had met was in the Gremlins Timepiece during a Flameforge feast celebration. The two hadn't gotten along well, leading to a city duel between the two. Officially the duel had ended in a stalemate stopped by the Flameforge captain responsible for the event but many were of the opinion that Dallion would have won.

So, what are you doing here? the Flameforge guild member asked, moving to the edge of the lake.

Isn't it obvious? Dallion smiled. He couldn't detect any malice in the other, although there was a deep sense of rivalry coming from his chest. Learning to swim. Never knew before I was awakened, so I think it's time I learned a bit.

What levels your athletics?

Zero. I don't have any.

Well, that could be a problem. Mord squatted at the end of the lake and tipped his hand in the water.

It might be, but I have to learn, anyway. It might not be that great, but still.

I heard you're joining the tournament, Mord said, splashing the water with his fingers.

Yep.

Dallion already knew where this was going. Apparently, the loss was still on Mord's mind. Not that it was a bad thing, Dallion himself wanted to test his skills again against him. Considering that this was to be an official fight, they wouldn't have to be bound by the city's restrictive rules.

I've been selected to represent my guild, the man pulled his hand out. So, you better not lose until you reach the official preliminary rounds. It'll be a shame if you did.

Dallion could almost see how eager he was to get into a fight.

We can have a sparring session before that, if you want, Dallion offered. Anytime.

I'm no Spike, Mord laughed. Besides, where's the fun in that? Preliminaries take place in the realms. Both of us can go all out there. You might even get to show me your new flying tricks.

Oh, I love it. What I despise is losing all my money as a result.

That was a weird statement, but at least Nil was honest that he had a problem. Rather, he was being honest that Adzorg had a problem. The thought made Dallion wonder how exactly did echoes

gamble. Did they bet using favors and information? Or did they have the owners of their items lend them money with which to buy. Both options sounded equally bad, and something Dallion hoped he'd never get to find out.

Did you come all the way here to tell me that? Dallion asked, more out of curiosity than anything.

Oh, and the captain still wants you to join, the man shrugged. I told her it's no use, but she's persistent. When she sets her mind on something, it's difficult to tell her otherwise.

You have your doubts?

Flameforge isn't the place for you. This entire city isn't. I could tell by a single look. In less than a year from now you'll be off to Vesinion, Kalba, or even the Imperial capital. Wherever you go, it won't be here.

That was strange. From the basic geography lessons Dallion had had with Nil, he knew that both cities mentioned were on the other side of the empire. One was a popular coastal city, while the other was described as the jewel of the north.

You're the type who is in search of something. When you find it you move to search for the next.

Ouch. That hurt. Dallion smiled.

It wasn't meant to, Mord said in all seriousness. It's just what you are. I've seen someone like you before. They stayed in a city for a few years, then disappeared without a trace. Years later, I heard he had joined a merchant organization that made deliveries to the capital. What happened to him after that, I can only guess. You seem the same way.

The words made Dallion think. This wasn't the first time he had been described in such fashion. Hannah had said it was because of his nature as an awakened. Others had mentioned they expected him to leave the city in a few years and move to more important things. Even some of the fears he had faced during his latest awakenings claimed that he'd leave Nerosal first chance he got.

No way. I have things here, Dallion tried to turn it into a joke.

Sure. Mord's glance became surprisingly hard. That's probably it. Anyway, take care of yourself. Don't drown before our fight.

I'll do my best.

The Flameforge guild member stood up and turned around. He was a few steps away when Dallion shouted out to him.

Mord. Does your guild have any sphere items for sale?

Artifacts? Mord asked, surprised, looking over his shoulder. Some. Mostly trinkets. Everyone's buying them like crazy. Happens every festival, although this year it's something else. The whole city is drowning with them.

The whole city was drowning, and yet none could be found, especially the type that Dallion needed.

Have any kaleidervistos?

That junk? Mord gave Dallion a strange look. Three months ago, I couldn't give away the stuff. Now he shook his head. I'll try, but it's a long shot. What do you need it for, anyway?

I thought it might be good for a present.

You're strange.

Possibly. Let me know if you find one.

Mord walked away, waving a hand. Dallion's music skills made it apparent that the man was going to try to do this favor, but at the same time, the likelihood of him succeeding was quite small. There was only one option left, something Dallion didn't want to resort to.

He could have sold it. But even if he didn't, there's something else I need to ask about the pool.

Before that, though, he was going to try and practice swimming a bit more. By lunch time, Dallion had managed the impossible: his swimming efforts had all but exhausted him. Considering his body was at level fourteen, that was a considerable feat. Thankfully, he had managed to grasp the basics of floating. Next, he was going to try actually swimming a bit.

With Jiroh back, lunchtime had become far more organized for the customers. With Dallion responsible for entertainment something he'd gotten used to, not to mention familiar with a vast number of songs and tunes Veil was left going about mending and improving. Normally, Gloria would have been there as well, but she had asked to skip a shift. No explanations were given, although Dallion knew that she was going to her theatre training. Also, he could sympathize with how conflicted she was. Having a hunter fury at the same inn was almost like a dream come true. Even Veil was having difficulties pretending he wasn't impressed. As the armadil shield liked to say, furies got all the attention.

Work dragged on forever. After each song, Dallion glanced at Hannah in the hopes she'd let him stop. The innkeeper had no such intention, letting him know he would play until the last customer had left and be happy about it. Thus, Dallion did just that. He had already improved his mandolin a few times, managing to increase his acrobatic skills to level twenty-nine. That meant that fairly soon he'd reach the cap limit with all four of his skills and could safely focus a hundred percent on forging, where to his shame he hadn't budged from one even if he could summon ingots of all normal metals.

Okay, you can stop, Hannah said, when there were only two customers left. It isn't the same without Gloria.

That's what I tried telling you, Dallion put his mandolin away. The look he received from Hannah was unmistakable if anyone had learned the rare skill to curse with looks, the innkeeper definitely had.

Dallion stood up, then made his way to leave, when Hannah shouted behind him.

Where do you think you're going?

Curious and with some unease, Dallion turned around.

You're supposed to eat, Hannah reminded. Music is still awakened stuff, so you better not faint on me.

Sure, I will. Dallion smiled in relief. I just wanted to buy a handkerchief. Be right back.

What do you need that for? the innkeeper asked, but Dallion was already outside. In truth, he had no need for a handkerchief. He already had several in his room. However, that was the only way he knew how to get in contact with the mirror pool.

Outside the inn, Dallion rushed to the stall in question, a handful of silvers in his hand.

Afternoon, Dal, the woman at the stall greeted him, as if it was just another day. Finally decided to buy something?

You know me too well. Dallion placed all the coins in the stall. There were seven of them. What do you recommend for this much?

The stall seller looked at the coins, then at him.

If you want a meeting, you can just say so, she whispered in a fashion that only a double digit awakened would hear.

I want a meeting, Dallion replied in similar fashion. So much about all the spy movies he had watched back on Earth. At least there they valued subtle messages. Here things were boringly pragmatic. Tonight.

Thats rushing things. The woman took the coins, then offered a green handkerchief to Dallion. Supposedly, it was one of the hot items. Dallion only found it to be extremely tacky. Ill let them know.

Cool. Ill be in the inn all day.

Theres no need for that, the woman smiled. The pool knows where you are every time of the day.

If it werent for the music skills, Dallion would have been slightly scared. As it stood, the woman was exaggerating. Even so, he suspected it wasnt by much.

Id also like to buy something, Dallion continued. What are the prices?

The look he got made it clear that he needed to be a bit clearer than that.

Sphere items. Doesnt matter if theyre cleared or not. Low-level trinkets.

The woman tilted her head, waiting for further details.

Not a weapon. Ill say more in person.

The range is quite large. Might be ten gold, might be a thousand.

Any discount for the favor I did?

The woman laughed.

Ill leave you to discuss that at the meeting. Anything else?

Yes, but thats for later. Dallion paused for a few moments. How did you get involved in this? he asked, adding a few notes of ease in his voice. The music synced with the stall seller almost perfectly. As you said, itll be up to be to discuss it at the meeting.

A piece of advice, the woman said. Avoid using music. Its not a good look when people feel they arent trusted.

Chapter 234: Belaal's Drum

Evening shift came and went. Several times Dallion checked his tournament ring to see whether there was any news on his next phase. The echo which was far more polite than the bureaucrat in person calmly explained that applications were still underway and it will be a while before the combat rounds began. Even so, he did share that Dallion was in the top twenty candidates. Familiar with leaderboards and game rankings, Dallion took that as a plus, although he would have also preferred to get a glance at the other names on the list.

While playing in the inn, there was the distinct impression that Jiroh had found out Dallion's plan. However, Dallion sneaked a bit of enthusiasm into Veil and Gloria as well as the rest of the crowd getting them to occupy the fury a bit more than usual. It wasn't too difficult, especially after Jiroh let it slip that she had been at Performers Plaza a few times. That seemed to have opened a floodgate that had lasted the entire evening after patrons had gone.

Knowing it would be suspicious if he went to his room early, Dallion had soldiers through it, occasionally saying a word or two. Finally, when all was said and done, when everyone had finished their food and helped take the dishes to Aspan, Dallion went up.

The first thing he did was open the window, in the hopes that Cloud would be there waiting for him. She wasn't. Instead, he found a small scroll stuck to the outside of the frame with what appeared to be a ball of wax. Opening it revealed a blank piece of paper. However, Dallion had a pretty good idea of what was needed.

ITEM AWAKENING

He found himself in a small yurt-like room. Everything around him was white and wavy, as if someone had tried to make a flimsy house out of poles and bedsheets.

You are in a small paper room.

Defeat the guardian to change the SCROLLS destiny!

As amusing as that sounded, Dallion had other plans.

Hello, a white figure emerged from the wall itself. It had no face or specific appearance, as if a sculptor had started working on it, but stopped at the silhouette stage. Bela's Drum, Grey Harbor. Wear your ring when you leave the city gates. Don't worry, you're expected.

I was expecting

Before Dallion could finish his sentence, the echo crumbled to fine dust before his very eyes. That was new, though unexpected. The first association that passed through his mind was a James Bond movie. It was also much cleaner. Dallion didn't have to destroy or eat the paper and there was not a soul alive that could hear the message now that the echo was dead.

Actually, yes

Sadly, I have to, dear boy. There are some things best left unsaid. It was a somewhat humiliating experience. In any event, its much better than the cesspit you went to reclaim your gear from. They werent joking about the rings. Its policy for everyone going there on special business to wear them. More than likely, youll even be provided an additional one as well.

What happens in the drum stays in the drum, Dallion said to himself. It was risky. His past self of a week ago wouldnt have dared, but it wasnt like he had much of a choice. Using his acrobatic skills, Dallion got out of on the roof, then gently closing the window so it appeared latched, went in the direction of Gray Harbor, leaping on a few rooftops as he did.

The feeling was exhilarating, but Dallion jumped down to the street after a few buildings. As much as this was one of his fantasies come true, it was careless. There were lots of the city guards that could see him, not to mention Jiroh.

It took close to an hour to reach the building in question. Dallion had received detailed instructions on how to get there once he left the city gate. At that point, though, he also had to put on his blocker ring. Thankfully, with Gen in his realm, that wasnt a reason for concern. The echo was in Noxs realm, ready to convey Dallions thoughts in case there was need.

Neither harpsisword nor the armadil shield was with Dallion along this journey. Since he had seen firsthand that he wouldnt stand a chance in a real fight, he preferred to leave them back at the inn, so as not to tempt people doing something rash. The mirror pool might have agreed not to do him any harm, but they hadnt said anything about third parties.

The Drum was quite larger than Dallion thought very much larger. Standing at four stories tall, it was a cross between a Las Vegas casino and a high-class fantasy brothel. No wonder it was famous. Knowing that captain Adzorg had frequented that place on a few occasions posed a few questions, however.

Good evening, dear customer, a rather tall, tanned woman greeted Dallion at the entrance.

Looking at her, one would think she was a companion with her long black hair and revealing attire. However, Dallion was also able to see that she was an awakened. More than that she had just tried to use music skills on him. Based on the effect, her skills had to be a single digit level at best. Nonetheless, the fact that she had attempted at all suggested that the staff here was more impressive than met the eye.

Is there any way I could be of service? the woman slid her hand down Dallions shoulder.

I think Im expected?

But of course, dear customer. Almost instantly, the woman pulled her hand away. Not a single muscle in her face flinched. Please, she moved aside, allowing him to enter. Enjoy your stay.

Thank you, Dallion replied with a smile, and did just that.

The inside was a mixture of music, perfume, and tobacco smoke. None of the scents were displeasing. Rather than the contrary, it was as if Dallion had walked into the inside of a sweet waffle. One thing that he noticed was that there wasnt the slightest trace of alcohol.

As he took a step, a large man in expensive clothes bumped into him. No words were exchanged, but the mans anger and disgust were felt thanks to Dallions music skills.

Dallion looked back. He didn't judge, nor was he disgusted, but his improved senses told him exactly the reason the man was there. Now wanting to create a scene, Dallion apologized beneath his breath, then calmly slid by the other patron.

The space was divided into a variety of sections connected, separated from one another by decorated cloth dividers. Each section had its own musician none of which were awakened as well as their own waiter. As Dallion walked forward, he saw through the bright lantern light a new set of dividers, colored purple. He didn't need any guesses what those were.

Evening, sir. One of the waiters said in a deep voice. Please accept this complimentary mask, he handed Dallion a domino made of what appeared to be porcelain.

Uncertain what to do, Dallion took it and put it on. There were no changes to be felt, and it definitely didn't cover enough of his face for anyone not to recognize him. If anything, the smoke was doing a much better job.

Please, follow me.

The waiter led Dallion to the stairway section of the building, which was situated in the center of the room. Dallion expected them to go up, based on his experience of the Icepicker guild hierarchy. Instead, the waiter did the cliché thing and took him down to the second floor underground. The atmosphere was much more different there; not that it was darker or more-gritty. Rather, the opposite. However, instead of sections, there were individual rooms ensuring much better privacy.

I would like to remind you it is not advisable to use any weapons or skills within the premises, the waiter said.

I suspected, Dallion replied with a slight smirk.

Very well. The waiter went to one of the rooms and opened the door for Dallion to enter. The master will be with you, shortly.

This was the point at which Dallion was supposed to ask the obvious question. However, he chose not to. And as tempting as it was to split and check out what would happen if he did, that might be considered an act of hostility and get him thrown out.

While small, the room was rather expensive, composed of couches of velvet surrounding a single table of white marble. Four lanterns hung from the ceiling, placed in the corners of the room, lighting up the place as if it were day. Whoever owned this place spared no expenses, which could only mean that they were earning that much more.

After several minutes, the door opened, and a thin figure in violet black clothes of fine silk entered. A full mask over the person's face made it impossible to tell whether the person was male and female, and the loose flowing clothes made any guessing impossible.

So, you are Dallion? a male voice asked, as the figure sat down on the opposite side of the table. With a swift action, he removed his mask, revealing the face of someone in his thirties. Cold blue eyes stared at Dallion, contrasting with the raven black beard and hair.

That's me, Dallion stood out of habit. That seemed to amuse the other. Of course, not to the extent that he would actually introduce himself.

You are an interesting person to deal with. Three hunters have already let us know that you are not to be touched. In fact, I was tempted to refuse this meeting. However, something piqued my interest. If so, many hunters are sticking up for you, who exactly might you be? To be frank, you don't seem all that special. No insult.

Dallion didn't say a word. This was clearly a provocation. The best course of action was to keep his head and continue with what he had come for.

I'd like to buy something, Dallion went directly to the point. Or rather I'd like to receive it as payment for services rendered.

This should be good, the other laughed.

Where is the man with the tattoos?

There has been a slight reshuffle in the pool, the man replied vaguely. Nothing of your concern. However, just because he isn't here doesn't mean your services have been forgotten. For that you have my thanks.

Only that? I saved a few of your people.

Might have saved, the man corrected. And you earned the right to have your friend a theatre sponsorship. Oh, and the guarantee that she will be kept out of pool dealings in the future. Unless she wishes to do so on her own accord, naturally.

That was a classical loophole, but Dallion had to admit that it had its uses. If not for it, he wouldn't be having this conversation.

I fulfilled the item's destiny.

That I must admit, the blue-eyed man rubbed the palms of his hands. And what do you want in exchange for it?

A kalerdervisto, Dallion whispered.

You want a trinket? I would be a fool not to agree. After all, that's a low grade artifact that doesn't do anything much. Well, except for finding things that I wish to remain hidden. Like a copyette, for example?

Sudden pressure hit Dallion like a wave. He had no idea where it had come from, but he could almost touch it. The person he was having a conversation with wasn't just a high-ranking pool member, it was very likely he was an aristocrat.

Are you thinking of running around the Nerosal in a misguided attempt to reveal him?

Yes, Dallion managed to say. Someone has to.

The guardian could have been lying. And even if he wasn't there's no guarantee that the copyette has even been here. For all we know, he might be hiding in the Imperial capital, or in some hole in the wilderness.

In that case, what would it hurt to have a kalerdervisto?

Stubborn, aren't you? Tell you what, since you did the pool a favor, I'll give you something in return.

The owner reached beneath his flowy garment and took out a small red dice, he tossed on the table. The interesting thing about the dice was that only one of the sides had a white dot on it.

An echo of one of my best girls, the man said. With the compliments of the Drum. What you do with it is up to you. Sell it, rent it out, or use it for personal consumption, if you will. Either way, its a fair compensation for what you did in the ring.

As far as bribes went, this one was the most unexpected. Part of Dallion wanted to accept just to see what the echo was. Then again, that was a bad idea on several levels.

I still want the kalerdervisto, he said firmly.

You really dont know what youre getting involved in, do you? The others attitude changed. It was like watching a cats claw emerge from its paw.

I have a basic idea. Its not like Im trying to take something thats not mine. I just want to buy the artifact.

Do you know what the word means? The owner leaned back. It stands for seer of beauty. Ive no idea what that meant at the time it was built, but it lets you see the invisible, some more than others. You can guess why there is a lot of interest in obtaining them.

I thought only hunters ventured out in the wilderness.

Hunters, merchants, soldiers, many do, but thats not the only thing. When used properly, it also allows echoes to be seen.

Dallion felt a chill down his spine. That was a major ability for certain. How come no one had mentioned it before? Having one of those was the same as having an anti-bug device back on Earth. Everyone who knew what it was wasnt eager to give it away.

Are you sure you dont want the die? the aristocrat asked. Its not a bad deal.

I think Ill pass.

Your choice. You dont know what youre missing. The man stood up. Sorry we couldnt come to a deal. Feel free to stay a bit before you leave.

Just one question. If its not for sale, how about I gamble for it? This is the right place for it, right?

Chapter 235: The Gauntlet

Betting on a gamble was a gamble in itself, but there was one consistent thing among gamblers: it was difficult for them to pull away from a score. The mirror pool aristocrat clearly wasnt a gambler, but he had built his fortune on taking advantage of people who were. After a few moments of consideration he had agreed to Dallions proposal, but adding a new twist: win-or-lose Dallion wasnt to get any cut of the profits. What was more, if he ended up losing, hed owe the mirror pool a minor favor. If he won, however, he was going to get a fully functional kaleidervisto.

The deal was outright bad, but Dallion no choice but to agree. The alternative was to ask the general for help, and Dallion remembered how well that had gone last time. Considering what the competition was about, though, it was somewhat questionable what would have been worse.

After the deal had been made, Dallion was taken to the third floor. While the space was smaller than the ones beneath, the sections it was separated into were larger. Overall, it was divided in a number

of gambling sections with games ranging from forms of dice to things that Dallion had never seen. Interestingly enough, there didn't appear to be card tricks of any kind. The spot Dallion was taken to was a large semi-circular table divided in eight sections of various colors, like an overly simplified roulette wheel.

Unsure what was expected from him, Dallion made his way to the straight side of the table and waited. The moment he did, a series of chimes echoed throughout the room. Everyone stopped whatever they were doing and looked in his direction. After the fourth chime, a silence filled the room, interrupted only by hushed whispers. The music on the floor stopped, and some of the lanterns were dimmed.

Dear clients, a bubbly female voice said.

Appearing from the far end of the room, a figure appeared. Similar to all the waiters and other Drum personnel Dallion had seen, she was beautiful, yet comparing her to all the rest was like comparing a piece of polished glass to a diamond. With paper white skin and flawless features, the woman walked forward, dressed in a green dress that Dallion could swear was made of emerald thread. Waving jet black hair fell down her back and shoulders like a midnight waterfall. And to top it all, the woman wasn't even human; she was a fury.

Please, forgive the distraction, the woman continued, her mouth in a perfect smile as she spoke. I know you are focused on your games, but we have a rather special treat for you tonight.

As she walked towards Dallion, everyone in the vicinity moved back, as if pushed by an invisible force.

An awakened has come to the Drum with a challenge. The fury extended her hand forward, presenting Dallion. I would love to tell you the name of this brave fool, but as you know, there are no names here.

The room erupted in low key laughter.

We shall call him Silver Mask. And he has come to try to pass through the gauntlet.

The lantern above the table Dallion was lit up not so much so that people could get a look at him, but rather that they could see what was on the table itself.

Our loyal clients already know what's in store, but for the sake of our first timers, I'll go through the rules of the gauntlet with our first timers.

That was actually a pretty good idea, given that Dallion remained clueless. Keeping his cool, he listened in.

Our brave challenge will be given eight items, the fury continued, as two waiters lifted a rather massive wooden chest behind her. Each of these items will be selected at random from a set of twenty. If you want to be the person selecting the item, you could do so, for a small fee, of course.

Laughter filled the room.

I would like to note that each has a gem of a very specific color, matching that of the section of the table. So once a decision is made, the selector can only choose from items that have their color.

The chest was opened and a rather rusty dagger was taken out. Despite the pitiful state of the weapon, the ruby on its hilt was quite visible.

The goal of our challenger is to mend all the items that are selected one at a time. Should he succeed, he will be given a substantial amount of money and another item will be selected. An important rule is that between each round the contestant, as well as all of you, dear clients, have the chance to wager on the color of the next item. Should you succeed, you triple your winnings in the case the contestant succeeds to mend the item in question. Should he fail well lets stick to happy things for now, shall we?

Mending roulette? Dallion could see that. It was a sort of game that an awakened amble would come up with. He was curious whether Adzorg had participated in a game of this nature, or maybe he had bet on someone who had.

The game continues until the challenger mends all items, or fails, the fury said, standing uncomfortably close to Dallion. Even so, he could feel a thin layer of air between her and himself. A monumental task, but one that holds a grand reward. If the challenger is successful, the owner of the Drum, Balaal himself, will give him all his gains, as well as a special prize. What do you think of that?

Dallion expected cheers and clapping. Instead, the people whispered to one another, nodding with impressed expressions. Dallion took that time to focus on the chest. Judging by the size, there could be anything inside, from rings to bowling balls. There was no way for him to find out what he was going to be given, but judging by the air, it wasnt going to be only slightly chipped.

There are just two rules, the fury raised her hand in the air. Improving items is not permitted. And twothere could be no more than one minute rest between endings.

So, this was a stamina game.

Of course, if anyone from you, dear patrons, wishes to buy him a drink between rounds to refresh himself, you could do so. Keep in mind, no alcohol will be permitted. We wouldnt want anyone to tilt the odds one way or another.

The usual hushed laughter filled the room again.

Dallion looked at the table. If he had to guess, each would be more difficult than the last. In order to win his prize, he had to go through them all. It didnt sound particularly challenging, which is why he suspected it to be.

Any questions? the fury whispered in a hushed voice.

No, Dallion replied.

Let the gauntlet begin! Please, place your bets!

The room exploded with instructions, as the people away from the table gave their coins on the section they wished. In a matter of minutes, the table was virtually full. The only color that was left empty was that black section.

No bets on black? Dallion asked.

Thats the color of the star, the fury whispered. Even our customers are somewhat superstitious.

Once the last bet was placed, the woman gave a sign for the chest to be placed a step away from the table.

Does anyone want to be the first to select? the fury asked loudly. There was no reaction. A wise decision, she went on with a smile. The first item that our challenger has to bend is she opened the chest, then quickly grabbed something from inside. A corroded silver goblet with a green emerald, she announced loudly to the dismay of many.

Holding it high for everyone to see, the fury then placed the item in its spot on the table. Now it was Dallions turn. And just to create some suspense, a sand hourglass was placed on the table as well.

Here we go, Dallion told himself and grabbed hold of the silver goblet.

ITEM AWAKENING

Reality changed. The good news was that the item was a perfectly ordinary item, even if it was made of silver. The bad news was that the realm looked as if it had gone through an end of the world scenario. Large patches of the walls and floor were corroded and in places full of holes. Even the floor seemed unsafe to walk on.

All claws and weaknesses in the room became instantly visible. In that aspect, Dallion was right there were quite a few sections on the floor that didnt seem to be able to hold his weight, or any weight, for that matter.

To his relief, the firebird instantly appeared and eagerly picked him up. That was one problem taken care of.

Take me there, Dallion pointed towards the only door in the room. Slowly, though! Just at the threshold of the labyrinth.

If this were an area of a sphere item, Dallion would have been busy fighting Moons know how many stinky and cracklings. Since it wasnt, the challenge was considerably easier. In addition to being misshapen and broken up, the labyrinth here had large weakened sections. One step there and Dallion might well fall star knows where and probably destroy the item as he did so. The way he saw it, there was one course of action: repair the damaged areas and then arrange the realm as he was supposed to.

Summoning an indoor of silver, Dallion placed it in the nearest large crack. The metal was almost immediately consumed, eliminating the fissure in the process.

Labyrinth section mended!

Overall completion 23%

Twenty-three percent? That left a lot of work to be done. On the bright side, Dallions forging experience and Luxs ability gave him a clear advantage. There were a few things he had to test out, though. Moving to one of the corrupted sections of the labyrinth, Dallion summoned another ingot of silver and gently had its edge touch the dark spot. Almost immediately, the black element started to spread up the ingot. Immediately, Dallion summoned the Nox dagger and did a series of slashes in rapid succession, adding cracks into the brick of metal until the entire part fell off.

Moments later, the corrupted part had dissolved entirely, while the rest had remained intact.

A waste for good silver, Dallion joked. At least he knew the method of getting rid of the corrosion.

Choosing a patch on the wall, Dallion used the Nox Dagger to cut out a part of the wall and removed it. As he did the fragment corroded in on itself, disappearing completely. Apparently, that was the one way to complete the task. Maybe not the fastest way, but it was efficient nonetheless.

Lux, Nox, itll be a long day. Dallion got to work.

Piece after piece he cut off the corrupted spots, summoning silver afterwards to fix them. There maybe was another way to see things through, but since he had learned some forging skills, why not make use of them? Yet, even with all of Dallions skills combined, it took quite a while before he had most of the labyrinth fixed.

When all the corroded segments were removed and all the holes filled, finally the blue rectangle emerged.

Labyrinth fully mended!

The GOBLET is now flawless.

Once that happened, Dallion returned to the real world and let go of the item.

It took a while for the crowd to make out what had happened. While everyone was probably familiar with the method of mending, only the most observant picked it out right away.

And our awakened has mended the first item, the fury announced almost on the second he was done. All those who guessed the color have their prize money doubled. However, would our challenger be as lucky this time? From now on, well be adding one more rule you can bet against him. As before, if you guess the color on which he would fail your winnings would be tippled. All those who wish to bet against, please tell the respective assistant and youll have a marker placed on your bet.

Thats harsh, Dallion whispered.

Yes, the fury smiled at him. Its supposed to be.

Chapter 236: Mage Impact

Hes gonna lose, someone whispered in the dimly lit room.

So far Dallion had gone through four items in total: a corroded silver goblet, a rust knife, a nearly shattered crystal earring, and a wooden jewelry box full of woodworms. Each of these items seemed deceptively easy to fix. However, in each case, the effort involved became greater and greater. In the case of the jewelry box, Dallion had had to fight with the actual creatures in the mending labyrinth itself. That was an unexpected turn of events, though not one he wasnt prepared for. In many aspects, it was almost like fighting guardians with one major distinction: defeating the worms made the box spit them out in the real world. In the end, when the box was completely repaired, it was brand new, while a small pile of woodworms surrounded it on all sides. The creatures were quickly brushed away by the fury, leaving the table spotless.

For the observers, less than five minutes had passed, but Dallion was starting to feel the pressure. Back in the inn, he had mended more items per shift, but in each of those cases, the damage was minimal less than a few percent here and there. In some cases, he had managed to get the item

flawless in a matter of true time minutes. Here, each of the items had taken him hours, at the very least.

The real challenge begins now, dear clients, the fury said loudly. Half of the colors are done. Four more remain, but does our challenger have enough strength? For those of you who are awakened, you know how difficult it is to repair an item in this state, and it will only get more difficult from here on.

The large chest was closed with a band. Two rather strong men took it away. In its place, a new one was brought. It was less than a quarter of the size of the previous one.

Its no longer about repairing common items. Now its time to repair artifacts!

The room exploded in cheers. Apparently, this was all it took to get the crowd excited. Bets poured in, with more and more people betting against Dallion than for. Three quarters of the piles of money had a black marker on them, indicating they their owners were betting on Dallion losing.

Does anyone want to be the one to select the next item? the fury invited again. Up to now, there hadnt been any volunteers. The woman had just opened the chest when a hand shot up.

Yes, someone said.

He was older than most of the crowd, possibly as old as Adzorg. A long white beard covered his chin and neck, making him almost look distinguishable along with his expensive fur clothes.

So, we do have a volunteer, the fury smiled. Please, come here, valued client. After you give the necessary amount.

The man tossed a pouch of coins to the nearest waiter, then walked up to the table, not even pausing to look back. Judging by the waiters reaction, there was more than enough in the pouch to let him have his fun.

Do you want me to remind you of the rules? the fury asked.

No. The man reached into the small chest and almost instantly took out his hand. There was a small metal brioche in his hand, one that didnt have any gem whatsoever.

Total silence filled the room. According to the rules, when an item didnt have a color, it was understood that the color was blackafter all, the Star didnt deserve any distinguishing markers.

This is quite a surprise, the fury said. Even she was slightly taken aback. Already black. This is quite the unusual challenge. Seems none got their bet tripled. Would you like to make an additional bet, dear client? As our volunteer, the Drum extend you this cour

No, the old man cut her short. Ill keep my bet for the end. Much more exciting this way.

Something in his voice didnt feel right. Both the fury and Dallion felt it, but neither could do anything about it. To ruin such a high stakes bet mid-way would create chaos. Even if the Drum agreed to pay back everyone, their potential gainswhich was a lot of moneywork of this disgrace would spread, costing the Drum a lot of its reputation.

Giving Dallion a quick glance, the fury placed the brooch on the black section of the table, then turned the hourglass around.

You have one minute to get ready, she told Dallion. It was made to look like part of the game, but he understood what she was saying.

There was no reply, as Dallion knew there wouldn't be. He waited for a few seconds, then slowly took hold of the item. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it, other than the fact that it was covered by a layer of soot or tar.

It was possible to call the person out, or even claim that the item wasn't broken, but doing so would ruin the betting streak and could cause just as much discontent for everyone.

Fine, I'll play your game, Dallion whispered so that only nearby awakened would hear.

For a fraction of a second, he thought he saw the old man smile.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

The realm Dallion found himself in was completely black. The floor, walls, and even ceiling were so dark that they merged with one another. In the past, that would have been fatal for Dallion, but not anymore. His music skills showed him that there was someone else in the room, and soon the blue flames coming from Lux let him see the opponent even better.

COMBAT INITIATED

This was definitely not part of the trial. It would have been a world of difference if Dallion had his armadil shield and harpsisword. Without them, he had to rely on other skills.

Without hesitation, Dallion split into three instances. In two, he rushed forward, aiming to attack, or at least to identify his opponent. In the last, he pulled back to safety.

The counterattacks didn't delay. In both attacking instances, the opponent used a skill Dallion hadn't seen before. There were no strikes, no attacks ranged or other. Instead, there was an example of a skill Dallion had only heard of so farmagic.

For a single instant, multicolored markers appeared in the air. Similar to miniature athletic arrows, they created a formula composed of symbols in the air a formula that the opponent followed with his fingers. Moments later, a ball of orange fire engulfed two of Dallion's instances.

TERMINAL WOUND

Your health has decreased by 100%

PERMANENT EFFECT - BURN SCARS

Your body has been permanently covered with burn scars. Your perception and reaction will be decreased by 25% percent until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

Dallion quickly selected his escaping instance and split in three again. Whoever this was, he wasn't joking around. To use magic causing external consequences made it clear he was targeting Dallion specifically. Why, though?

Who are you? Dallion asked, adding as much self-confidence as he could.

In all the superhero movies back on Earth, the villains always had the tendency of revealing at least part of their plans before the actual fight. In real life, such behavior was exceedingly unlikely unless they got a slight nudge.

The mirror pool wont be happy if you ruin our little gamble, Dallion continued. The sounds already synched with the vibration of his opponent. And after a second, a grain of confidence emerged in the others body. Even so, it didnt prove to be enough.

Magic markers appeared once more, followed by a large sphere of fire. Immediately Dallion summoned his buckler shield, then quickly split into three new instances.

Lux, get us out of here! he ordered.

All three instances were taken in different directions. Normally that would be a bad thing, but right now it gave Dallion greater maneuverability. This time, only one of his instances was engulfed.

Do you work for the Star? Dallion persisted with his music skills. Or are you linked to the copyette somehow?

You have no idea what youre talking about, the opponent said. The voice was identical to that of the old man who had given the brooch.

It made sense. That also suggested that as long as Dallion could get one good hit, the battle was over. On the other hand, he had to be careful to evade the echos magic. So far, he had only seen one spell, but there was no guarantee that more wouldnt follow.

Nox, try to take care of him, Dallion said. One good thing about the darkness was that the crackling felt at home here.

Its not your place to get involved, the echo suddenly became chatty. The overconfidence that Dallion had put inside him was finally starting to have an effect. Forget about the Star and the copyette. Return to Dherma and enjoy the rest of your life there.

Quite a tempting offer. But what if I dont want to? There are a lot of things going on for me here. Maybe Ill stay.

Youre meddling with things that are beyond you. This isnt a League of Legends tournament. Theres a lot more involved.

Dallion froze. That was more than a coincidental reference. The old man, whoever he was, wasnt just some disgruntled mirror aristocrat, or a puppet of the Star, he was someone from Earththe first person Dallion had found other than his grandfather.

I dont want to kill someone from Earth, but I will if you dont back off. This game is too important for you to interfere. Maybe if youd show up a few decades earlier things would be different, but not now.

A large grouping of magic symbols appeared in the darkness. Like a wild programmer, the echo slid his fingers along all of them, completing the magic formula. Dallion had no idea what the effects would be, but he knew they werent going to be good. Focusing as hard as he could, he split in five instances in an attempt to stop the echo from completing it. Lux thrust him forward at almost instant speed, just in time for one instance to pass over the layer of markers.

What followed was enough to freeze the will of any person. A wall of flame, as large as half the realm, appeared and moved forward like a curtain. Four instances of Dallion were burned to cinders as the merciless flames went on, crashing into the wall.

Already the echo had started to create another spell, when a red rectangle appeared.

HAND SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of his right hand.

As expected of the crackling, it had bided its time, finding the perfect moment to act, then slashed what he perceived to be the echos greatest weaponhis hands.

The wall of multicolored markers disappeared. The echo looked at his arm in disbelief, then poofed out of existencefar slower than a normal echo should. Possibly, the remnants of the magic spell had kept its form until the spell itself had ended. That was a whole different field, Dallion knew nothing about.

As tempted as he was to exit the realm right now and continue his conversation with the old man, Dallion had enough reason to know that was not an option. After all, he was still in the Drum, and the bet was ongoing; and while the brooch wasnt among the items that needed repairing, he had to mend it nonetheless.

Thanks, Nox, Dallion said as the crackling meowed, licking its paw. You too, Lux. You both did good.

No doubt about it, the familiars had saved him yet again from a nasty situation. The question remained, though, why would someone from Earth want to stop him, especially with everyone else going on in Nerosal?

Chapter 237: The Spectral Shardfly

Damn it! Dallion said beneath his breath. Of all the times he could have used advice from Nil, he had to have a blocker ring. Done, Lux?

The firebird let out a sad chirp. Having to act as a portable flamethrower and burn the coat of tar off every inch of the broochs domain wasnt his idea of fun.

Curled up on the floor, Nox meowed, indicating a spot the firebird had missed. Since his level up, the crackling had taken on a more supervisory role, especially when Lux was around.

Less than an hour had passed since the defeat of the echo, and it still felt too long. Dallions recklessness constantly pushed him to leave the item unmended. The experience and wisdom that had come from leveling up, though, told him that would only make things more difficult in the long run. The truth was that he had to be preparedif the old mans echo could do magic in the domain of the brooch, it was almost certain he could do it in the real world as well.

A mage this was the first time that Dallion had come across one. In the past the closest thing he had seen had been Clerics someone born with the attribute, but failed to learn the skill condemning him to life as an outcast without a name in the service of the order of the Seven Moons.

In the realms, each spell had required specific hand and finger motions. In the real world, there would be no markers, but the actions were likely the same. That meant that the first thing that Dallion had to do was make sure that the man couldn't use them, one way or another.

Labyrinth fully mended!

The BROOCH is now flawless.

Finally, Dallion said. Guys, get back to the realm. Gen will tell you if I need you.

Both familiars disappeared. Moments later, so did the realm surrounding Dallion. Events in the room continued from the moment Dallion had taken the item. His eyes quickly focused on the old man, especially his hands. Only then did he place the brooch in its place on the table.

Isn't that quite the surprise, valued customers! The fury said the instant the noise sounded. Our challenger has successfully mended five of the eight items. Three remain. Quite the feat! The question is, does he have the stamina to keep on going!

A hint of surprise appeared on the old man's face, even if Dallion could sense no emotions coming from him. He had to be using something to hide them from view. At this point, there were only two things that the man would likely do: leave, or attack Dallion directly despite the consequences. However, Dallion didn't like either option.

Maybe you'd want to try again? Dallion said loudly. This was certainly a breach of game protocol if there was such a thing, but it was intriguing enough to let both the fury and the gamblers consider it. After all, it was another chance to bet on something, something that didn't usually occur.

Aware of the challenge that had been issued, the old man narrowed his eyes, looking straight at Dallion. This wasn't about the game, it was about answers. Slowly, his hand moved towards the open chest, but then at the last movement, the mage pulled it away.

No. I know when I'm beaten. Maybe the Seven will be with me next time. He stepped back. Good luck to you, challenger. May you find what you're looking for.

Till next time, challenger. The man turned around and started his way to the staircase. Dallion tried to follow, but the instant he made a step, a barrier of air pushed him back to his place at the table.

No, the fury whispered so that only he could hear. The Drum will take care of this.

The mirror pool against a mage? Dallion wasn't certain what the outcome would be, but he had no choice to trust that they'd be able to handle him. With some luck, they might also share some information on the matter.

Is there anyone else who wishes to select an item? the fury went back to her hostess act. Three remain. Maybe you will be the one who ends the challenger's streak?

A wave of hands rose up. Now that the black section was out of the way, everyone seemed more than eager to participate. A small bidding war commenced with people fighting for the chance to draw. In the end, an old and rather opulent man won. Waddling to the fury, he reached into the chest and took out a hand mirror that was half eaten by reddish moss.

Purple! the fury announced. Might this be the color that ends it all? Itll only take a few moments to find out. She took the object from the man and placed it on its spot at the table. Well, a moment for us, but several hours for our contestant. She then turned the hourglass around. One could say this would be the third most challenging moment of the challengers life.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

A vast red forest emerged around him. That was to be expected for an item of this nature. The pack of porcupine tigers was an unpleasant touch, though.

Species: Rust Tigerpine

Class: Rust

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills:

-Claw Slash

-Dart Quills

Weak Spots: back of head

Lux, Dallion said as he summoned his buckler and short sword. It had been a while since he had used that weapon in battle. With the blocker link severing his link to his harpsisword, there was little else that could be done.

The firebird appeared and grabbed him up.

Right on time, Dallion said.

COMBAT INITIATED

Several tigerpines leapt at him. Their actions seemed particularly precise. This was probably why so few had completed the gauntlet. While the game wasnt rigged per se, it was quite close. The whole idea was to exhaust the challenger as much as possible in the first half, then have him engage in combat. Quite clever.

Dallion split into two instances, while using his athletic skills to twist in the air. Biding his time, Dallion did a series of arc slashes in the air. Two of the attackers disappeared in a cloud of reddish rust. Normally, it should have been more, but Dallion had become unaccustomed to wielding a short blade. His attack skills were more than a match, however.

More of the creatures attacked after he landed on the ground, attempting to flank him and attack on all sides. The approach quickly backfired, resulting in more killed creatures. At that point, though, the tigerpines adapted their tactics. Instead of taking him face on, then leapt away, hiding among the trees. In most circumstances, this would have been a good approach, especially since it allowed them to shoot quills at him from any direction. However, Dallions music skills allowed him to know exactly where they were, and Luxs speed made it all too easy to evade their ranged attacks. Also, they werent the only ones who had such abilities.

Think you can deal with the cracks, Nox? Dallion asked, as he summoned his dartbow.

The crackling meowed before leaping into the crown of the nearest tree.

Thought so, Dallion aimed at one of the sources of emotions and took a shot. Moments later, another creature was gone.

As easy as the fight seemed, though, Dallion knew perfectly well that without his ability to fight and heal, things would be a lot more dire. As it was, all he did was shoot individual creatures left and right. That, too, didn't last long. When he saw all blobs of emotion running away towards a single point, he knew exactly what was up—all creatures were merging in one single entity.

Ready, Lux? Dallion asked. This was what he was hoping for. For one thing, it would save a lot of time, for another Dallion knew exactly how to proceed.

As the giant tigerpine emerged above the forest, each quill as large as a giant spear, Dallion was thrust just above its head in one single boost from the firebird. From there, he fired one bolt in the back of the head of the creature, then let go of the dartbow and summoned the sword as he moved down to continue.

Red rectangles appeared one after the other, each a critical hit. Dallion kept on going, hacking with as much speed as his body would let him. In mere seconds, the creature halved in size, leapt forward in an attempt to escape the onslaught. Quills filled the air, flying in all directions to provide at least some protection from Dallion. None of that had any effect in the least. What Dallion didn't evade he blocked with his shield, taking advantage of his guard skills even in the air to slow time, and once he had slowed it down to a freeze, he flew to the creature once more and did a multiple attack on its weak point.

Soon enough, the threat was gone. Not too long after, a blue rectangle emerged informing Dallion that the realm was mended by five percent. Nox had also been busy.

Let me down, Lux, Dallion said, unsummoning all his weapons. I think it'll be better to walk from here.

The order slightly confused the firebird, but it obeyed, spending the rest of the time perched on Dallion's shoulder.

Based on the nature of the mirror, it was composed of three levels, all but the last cleared. That meant that Dallion would have to fight his way to the last guardian, killing all blockers, cracklings, and tinkers on the way. The key thing was to leave the final guardian alive.

Considering that the final level would have to be fought in darkness annoyed Dallion somewhat, but given the weak nature of his opponents, it was more a bother than a real concern.

Interestingly enough, upon arriving in the chamber of the first guardian, Dallion found that the creature had already been defeated. In its place, stretching on the floor, Dallion found Nox. The crackling yawned, gave Lux a confident glance, then stood up and led the way to the gate for the next level.

TRUSTING

(+2 Mind)

Delegating tasks to those you trust is a boon. Delegating to those that cannot be trusted is a peril. Better make sure you know which is which.

The achievement came at the perfect moment, although Dallion was somewhat worried what the negative effect would be. In the short turn, Dallion would be able to use split more efficiently in combat, which was always a plus.

The second level of the mirror turned out to be a frozen lake of silver. In many ways it was what one would expect, though there was an unspoken eeriness about it. Although Nox seemed certain that there were no cracks nearby, Dallion couldn't shake the feeling that there were eyes watching him. Every now and again, he would stop and use his music skills to look around.

At one point when Dallion reached the center of the lake the silvery surface cracked beneath his feet. Lux immediately grabbed Dallion and lifted him into the air, while Nox lazily leapt back to his own realm.

Meanwhile, from the shattering surface beneath, a giant butterfly emerged.

LEVEL 2 GUARDIAN

Species: Spectral Shardfly

Class: Crystal

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills:

-Illusion

-Razor wings

-Crystal dust

Weak Spots: none

Keep your distance, Lux, Dallion ordered.

This wasn't the first time he had faced a flying creature, although for some reason, he felt reluctant to fight this one. Even if it was an opponent, his heart almost ached at the prospect of crushing such beauty. Was that part of the illusion? However, it didn't matter much.

I can see you, Dallion said, adding the urge to surrender in his voice. The real you, not the illusion you're showing me.

The butterfly didn't react, flapping its wings as it remained almost stationary in front of Dallion.

We don't have to fight, you know. I'm not here to claim the artifact, just to clean it. Although I see you've done a good job on your level.

Flattering combined with music had its effect, making the butterfly move somewhat back. If nothing else, it was willing to listen.

Thank you, Dallion smiled. All I need is to pass. You don't need to surrender, or even accept a draw.

It doesn't work that way. The guardian's voice was high and echoey, as if hundreds of crystals rang in unison to create a single voice. The gate won't open while I'm here.

No exceptions?

There can be none. These are the rules of the realm were in. In order to continue to the next level, I must be defeated.

And if its a draw?

The ring of laughter filled the air. It was genuine, unadulterated laughter with no afterthoughts.

Why are you so eager to complete the challenge? the shardfly asked. You know its impossible.

Now it was Dallions turn to be surprised. He had gotten used to the idea that some of the guardians had the ability to talk even those that didnt hold humanoid form but he didnt expect this one to be so up to date with current events.

You arent the first to try the gauntlet, the guardian explained. There's one every few weeks. All of them reach this stage. When they do, they think they're close to winning. That's as far from the truth as it could be.

You've been observing them.

That's the only thing we could do, locked in the chest. They consider us too valuable to be given away and too useless to be sold, so they keep us locked here as part of their game. People like you come and repair us and after they fail, the owners of the drum break us again for the next game.

Dallion felt sick at the thought.

I didnt know Dallion replied. I thought they were using the game to get you mended for free.

You're quite the romantic, the guardian laughed. Such a lovely notion, but not for a place like this. At least we're not affected as much by the state of the domain we are in. Simple items guardians have it far worse.

When this is over, Ill buy you out, Dallion said.

I know you'll try, but it will be useless. You cant buy all the items in the world. You'll save a few, but their place will be taken by others. There's no winning this game. The most you can do is bring a bit more light as you pass through.

You're quite philosophical for a guardian, Dallion said.

There was no music entangled in the butterfly's words, but the effect was the same. Sorrow verging on pain filled Dallion out of nowhere. Part of his mind insisted that this had to be an illusion, yet the rest knew it wasn't. It was just as seeing the grime beneath the glitter. The mirror pool made it more obvious than most. They were dealing with silk and gold and beauty, satisfying the desires of their valued clients while keeping the cost away from everyone's eyes.

Ill let you defeat me. The butterfly moved closer. But that wont help you. The gauntlet is rigged.

I know. Im prepared for that.

No, you arent. You've pretty much mended this item, and you'll likely mend the next, but the last one is where you'll fail.

Why?

The last item you'll be given wont be an item. They'll give you something that uses your strengths against you. It will be like facing an impossibility.

Theres always a way.

Dallions mind tried frantically to think of impossible challenges. Given the combination of skills and familiars he had, it didnt seem like there was anything that could surprise him. Although that was probably what everyone had thought so far.

I can tell you what the last item will be. A glow appeared around the butterflys wings. But Ill ask a favor in return.

Tell me, he said.

Chapter 238: Final Dagger

Only one left, valued customers! the fury announced, beaming with joy. Of course, Dallion could tell it was all fake. She wasnt particularly pleased with Dallions performance or even with the amount of money the Drum was taking in. If anything, she was bored with the whole thing. Considering the fact that she was a fury, and possibly awakened, Dallion could empathize a bit.

His attention, however, remained on the staircase. The mage who had given Dallion the warning and attempted to get him to lose or quit the gauntlet had gone down less than a minute ago. Unless he was running, that suggested that he was still in the building. If Dallion managed to mend the final item in the next half minute or so, he still had a chance of running down and catching up. The only thing that made that possibility less likely was the useless announcements that prolonged the challenge.

By now, our challenge must be quite spent. Does he have enough strength to continue with the final challenge? The fury went on and on. We shall soon see. Before that, though, lets make things a bit more interesting.

Gen, tell Harp. Maybe she can find a way to tell Jiroh or someone at the inn.

The plan wasnt the best. Jiroh was going to be furious he was messing around with the mirror pool, and that wasnt even close to how much Eury was going to be when she, in turn, found out. However, some pain was worth it.

Since theres only one color left, selecting an item from the chest would be pointless. That is why well let chance decide.

An excessively muscular waiter brought a large tray with three items on it. At a quick glance, all of them seemed to be the samethree daggers covered in black rot. From what Dallion could make out, there was more dirt than grime holding them together, making it difficult to determine the actual damage.

Three daggers, the fury said as the ray was put on the end of the table. Brand new from the wilderness. Each has guardians that no one awakened has seen.

Dallion could tell that was a lie. He could feel dishonesty ringing in her voice, even if she was masking it perfectly.

In order to mend a dagger fully, our challenger will have to defeat all but the last guardian of the dagger. As you all remember, the rules of the gauntlet item cannot be improved, only mended.

But how do we choose which item he's to mend? Do we let our challenger decide? The fury slid the back of her left-hand fingers along Dallion's face. Or better yet, maybe you, our valued customers, would decide. The fury flashed a smile. If you want him to enter the left dagger, raise your left hand. If you want the right, raise your right hand. And of course, if you want him to try his luck in the middle, raise no hands at all.

Nice trick. Dallion could see how she was trying to manipulate the choice. More people were likely to do nothing at all and leave him with the middle dagger. That had to be the trick.

Please, determine our challenger's destiny!

A number of hands rose in the air, but nowhere nearly as many as the people in the room. The fury had played her cards well, creating the impression that the crowd had made the determination. In fact, the Drum had made the choice all along.

Ah, a wise decision, the fury took the middle dagger and placed it in the only remaining spot on the table. Now the final challenge is upon us. Please, choose. Do you think that our challenger will succeed, or will he fail?

Gold coins poured faster than the waiters could take them to the gambling table. At this point, Dallion had no hope of catching the mage. His only option was for Harp to have managed to pull something off.

The table was soon stacked. The bets were split pretty much ten to one against Dallion. From a business perspective, Dallion thought Belaal would let him win. That way the Drum would keep not only the half the bets, but Dallion's winnings as well. However, there was more to it than simple math. He himself had made a bet against the owner and there was no telling how that would affect the odds.

One minute, the fury whispered as she turned the hourglass for the last time. Make a good performance once it's over.

Dallion grabbed hold of the dagger.

ITEM AWAKENING

The green rectangle appeared. When Dallion saw it didn't have the world sphere in it, he already knew what was going on. As it turned out, the butterfly had been right all along.

The setting around him was quite miserable: a room with walls made of black mold with pieces of metal visible every now and again. The mending labyrinth was in the same condition, but unlike all the items before, there was one huge difference: this wasn't an item that could be mended. The damage and corrosion was so far gone that it had become the only thing keeping the item together. If Dallion were to try and remove the crud, the item itself would snap under its own pressure.

That's why all the previous challengers had failed. The plan was quite simple, but very sneaky. The best part was that it was very visual. Having half of the item fall off left nothing to interpretation.

The gamblers would be left with the impression that they had won, for the most part ignoring the amounts of money they had lost so far. What was more, having someone fail so close to completing the challenge would make people hunger for more.

The rectangle described the room as being level three, however, that was beyond the point. Combining his music and forging skills, Dallion looked around, searching for places from where to start fixing this mess.

While it was true that he had never studied architecture or the like, he had played enough physics games back on Earth to have some idea of what to do. Hopefully, it was going to be enough.

The first thing Lux did upon appearing on Dallions shoulder was to let out a depressing chirp.

I know, little guy. Dallion petted the familiar on the head. We still have to do it, though.

The more Dallion looked, the more he was convinced that the items state wasnt an accident. The damage was too precise, measured to be in a state of equilibrium. In order to get even some foundations in place, Dallion had to engage in a game of reverse-Jenga. If the stakes werent so high, Dallion might have even enjoyed this.

Sorry about this, Nox. Dallion summoned the Nox dagger. Ill need your help as well.

The crackling remained stoically silent, likely to show the younger familiar how things were done.

Dallion looked down. It, too, was a minefield of crud and decay. The spot that Dallion had appeared in was pretty much the only bastion of safety. Still, there were a few metal lines visible extending outward. Bending down, Dallion used the tip of the dagger to scrape off a bit of decay. Careful as a surgeon with a scalpel, he revealed the metal element.

Tin

, Dallion thought. Considering the wealth the owner of the Drum had, it was no surprise hed cheap out on the item. Summoning a tin ingot, Dallion carefully pushed it through the black mass, until it touched the metal of the room.

Your turn, Lux, he said. Go slow and heal evenly.

For over a minute, the firebird stood on the top of the ingot, its flames slowly melting it from the bottom up. The process was excruciatingly stressful. Dallion could feel sweat form on his forehead. There were constantly two instances of him at the readyone doing nothing, and the other yelling at Lux to stop. Fortunately, the latter never came into play. In the end, the connection was complete and a new segment of metal was connected to the safe zone.

One down, Dallion said, and focused on the next.

After a quarter hour, eight metal lines were connected to the starting spot, like bars in concrete. The only difference was that the concrete was the thing that Dallion had to remove, which he slowly did. This was the first time he got to glance into the nothingness beyond the item. There was no window to the real world, not a colorful rectangle, just a dark void that was darker than black.

The process took much less time than Dallion expected. After only a few minutes, the space between the metal bars was filled up, looking identical to that of the original spot. Now came the moment of truth.

Get ready to lift me, Lux, Dallion said. Then, after a deep breath, he stepped on one of the new sections.

If the floor would let out now, it could mean pretty much the end of his hopes to gain a kaleidervisto. Thankfully, that didnt happen. Just to make sure, Dallion split and jumped on the floor in a few of his instances. The metal held.

A jolt of euphoria passed through him, bringing him the sweet satisfaction of knowing he had found a way to beat the trap set up for him by Balaal. The moment was quickly crushed by the realization of how much time it would take. So far, he had spent half an hour only mending a few feet of the starting room. He hadnt reached the walls, let alone the mending labyrinth itself.

Dallion wasnt particularly good in math in the past, but thanks to his improvement in mind, he was able to tell that it would take him weeks at the very least to complete this task. Even in terms of true time, that was a lot. However, there was nothing he could do about it.

Well, guys, better get to it. Dallion looked around for the next section to mend. The sooner we start, the sooner well get to finish.

Soon, as it turned out, was a very relative term. The entire first few days Dallion had spent on the starting room alone. The floor was fixed almost without issue, but when it came to the walls, Dallion was glad that he kept a spare instance while working, even if it was causing him a faint but permanent headache. On four occasions entire sections of the walls had been seen crumbling, forcing him to choose the safe instance and try a new approach. It was almost like using a reality undo an undo that required focus and effort to maintain.

The mending labyrinth had turned out to be far worse. Not only did he have to deal with the standard issues he was accustomed to, but he had to take into account the twistiness of the labyrinth itself. Whoever had made the damage had made sure to twist the item like a corkscrew, requiring Dallion first to solve the puzzle in his head before he could even get to work. At one point, the only thing that kept him going were the blue rectangles announcing that he had mended another percent of the realm.

On the second week, hunger started to kick in, further reducing Dallions work capability. While it did no real damage, the feeling made him more and more testy, forcing him to spend half of the day sleeping in the starting room. Feeling his annoyance, Lux and Nox tried to cheer him up as best they could, but that didnt always work.

Finally, after three and a half weeks by Dallions count, he had arrived at the last patch of decay in the realm. Standing in front, Dallion almost felt a reluctance to finish. It had taken him so much time to get this far that part of him was sad it was over. The goals that he had come in with now seemed so far away, as if part of a different life.

There was a whole world waiting for him beyond this realm, the real world. And once he mended this last one patch, he was going to get his prize.

Here goes nothing. Dallion scraped out the remaining crud. As before, the substance melted in the air, as if it had never been, leaving a large hole. Darude, Dallion whispered, and summoned a tin ingot.

Chapter 239: Artifact Prize

Seconds after Dallion returned to the real world, the furys smile waned. She already knew what had happened, and what was to follow, but the show had to go on for the sake of the customers, she had to be both surprised and thrilled by Dallions success.

Done, Dallion said as he placed the dagger in its place on the table.

Pleased with himself, Dallion then stepped back. He could feel a flash of annoyance flicker through the fury. His winning wasnt such a big deal looking at it logically, but it was likely to upset the owner of the Drum. Then again, the money they made from the bets was certain to make up for that. In part, at least.

Our challenger has put the item on the table! The fury continued with the performance. What does this mean? Could it be that he had completed the gauntlet? Is it even possible? The long-time valued customers would remember that there was a similar case seven years ago. However, since then many have tried and none succeeded.

That sounded vaguely interesting. It was curious to find out who it was. Could it be Adzorg? That would explain why he wasnt welcome here anymore. The thought made Dallion remember the old man who had tried to get him to lose.

Thinking back, only a few minutes had passed in real time since the attempt, but by the looks of it was probably already too late. Even if Dallion received his prize now, he would be hard pressed to catch up to the mage. That was one of the problems of doing realm exploration during something else after a week of true time, details became vague. Only the overall goal of what Dallion was doing remained clear: get the kaleidervisto, find the copyette, and find a way to let the local authorities know.

The moment of truth is upon us. The fury went to the table and picked up the final item. The black grime still covered the dagger. Holding it high in the air, the woman pressed against it with her thumb. The black grime fell off, revealing a fully fixed object. It looks like our challenger might have done it.

She continued cleaning the weapon. Each time a larger piece fell off, half the crowd held their breaths. With the amount of money bet on this, their reaction was understandable. When the entire item was revealed, a wave of disappointment filled the room, making Dallion stop using his music skill. This was the first time he had felt such intensity coming from so many people at once.

Its unbelievable! We have our first victor in seven years! I know that some of you might feel somewhat disappointed, but this is history in the making! Who knows when someone else will be able to achieve such a feat? Or maybe itll happen tomorrow? In the Drum no one can say for certain!

Hushed laughter filled the air.

Thank you all. Please go back to enjoying your games. And be sure to order a glass of your preferred drink on the house. After all, we too have to mark this momentous occasion.

Disgust was the first emotion that came to Dallions mind after hearing this. It was outright impressive how the fury managed to control the mood of the room with her performance alone. She wasnt even using awakening powers as far as Dallion could tell. There was no doubt about it, the non-human races were outright scary.

Come along, the fury whispered to Dallion, then made her way towards the staircase.

Dallion followed. None of the muscular waiters followed, which meant that the fury was confident she could take him on her own, if the need arose.

Silently they made their way to the floor above, then continued upwards until they reached an ornate metal gate. As the fury reached towards the handle, the gate unlocked seemingly on its own.

Nice trick you did down there, she said, pulling the gate so she and Dallion could pass. What trick did you use?

This and that, Dallion smiled. You dont expect me to reveal all my secrets?

Actually, it doesnt matter. I was just curious. Challengers dont normally fix the last one. Well, unless they use magic, but you dont look like someone who had magic.

Can you tell?

People who have magic dont need to beg for artifacts. They come and take what they want.

Like the old man?

The question filled the fury with an air of defensiveness. If she was willing to chat before, that inclination had quickly disappeared. At the same time, Dallion was fairly certain that she didnt know anything about him. Or maybe she had sensed that he was capable of magic?

Is he a regular? Dallion pressed on.

That is not your concern. As I said before, well take care of that.

Its your house. Dallion shrugged. As long as I get what I was promised, I dont care how you run this place.

The top room of the building ended up being the equivalent of a large vault. Shelves of artifacts filled the room. It was nowhere as impressive as the generals collection, but the place was built to be practical. All rows of the items had a blank sheet of paper next to them likely a description, price amount, or both.

Belaal wont join us for this? Dallion asked.

Why should he? The fury smirked. Hes not one to waste his time with unpleasant things. Had you lost, hed probably spend an hour with you drinking tea to enjoy your failure.

All great people have their shortcomings, the fury acknowledged she didnt particularly like her boss habit. Thats your prize there. The woman pointed at one of the shelves. Youre welcome to get it.

Just like that? Arent you afraid I might take something else as well?

Please. The fury smiled. If you had it in you, I wouldnt have invited you here.

Then why did you?

To let you know what else you can get in exchange for a service here and there. Youre skilled. Still a bit low, but youll get past the next gate. I can see the drive in you. When that happens, it would be better if you keep the Drum in mind.

So, its good for business?

Also, should you become a hunter, Id like you to feel comfortable knowing that you could sell, swap, or loan your items to us. I can assure you, youll get a better deal than you already have with the general.

Apparently, that too had become common knowledge. Everything considered, Dallion was surprised his guild didnt know. Or maybe they did, but were keeping quiet about it?

Casting the questions away, Dallion went to the shelf and took the item in question. It was slightly smaller than the ones he had personally fulfilled, but the shape and composition was unmistakable a small vase made entirely of crystal and mother of pearl.

How do you use it? Dallion looked inside. Nothing particularly happened.

For what youre aiming no idea. If you want to see echoes hold it in front of your right eye and rub.

Come on. Dallion laughed.

It sounded too much like a joke to be true. The furys expression, however, suggested the opposite. Either that or she was a very good actress. Given the performance downstairs, both were equally possible. Ultimately, Dallion decided to give it a try. Lifting the kaleidervisto to his left eye, he looked inside, then rubbed the artefact with his thumb.

Keep your other eye open, the fury said.

Nothing happened. Dallion kept looking forward, feeling extremely stupid. He tried to rub the surface of the item more then, when that failed, he tried to rub it some more.

Very funny, he turned towards the fury, still holding the vase in front of his eye. Now tell me how it really

Dallion suddenly noticed something different superimposed over the fury was a minuscule figure of Belaal in her head. Quickly, Dallion removed the kaleidervisto. The figure disappeared as well. A deep feeling of dread passed through Dallion, making him freeze for several seconds. Curiosity soon took over, forcing him to put the vase in front of his eye once again. The fire was there as before, looking at him with cold annoyance.

An echo, Dallion couldnt keep himself from whispering.

Was this what the artifact did? No wonder Belaal wanted to keep it for himself. It was like seeing into someones mind. In effect, it was close he was looking into the furys realm and selectively focusing on the echo there.

Within moments, the fascination disappeared, as Dallion realized exactly what he was looking at. This wasn't just some echo she had created to protect her domain; no, the echo was someone else's.

You have a limiting echo, Dallion noted.

Part of the cost of working in the mirror pool. The higher you want to climb, the more restrictions are placed on you.

Belaal is keeping an eye on you. Constantly.

That's how the organization has survived for so long. Don't feel bad, it's no worse than having him look over my shoulder.

That didn't sound very reassuring. Dallion was just about to ask something when he was preemptively interrupted.

You have your prize, now I suggest you leave.

The hint was clear. Dallion moved the kaleidervisto away from his face. Given that the owner of the Drum was such a sore loser, it was wise for Dallion to take the advice.

How many furies does the mirror have? he asked as he made his way out of the room.

Enough to be efficient. Needless to say that the owner wouldn't appreciate you sharing what happened here.

Of course. Dallion had no intention of blabbering about to the world that he had won, but he wasn't going to hide it from the people and guardians he trusted, either. Anything else I should keep in mind?

Instead of an answer, the fury reached for Dallion's face and gently removed the mask he was wearing.

You no longer need that. Good luck in your futile hunt. And remember, if you ever want to sell your prize back to us, the Drum is always open.

That sounded like a joke. If Dallion wanted to sell the item, he would have done so elsewhere.

The first thing Dallion did upon leaving the building was to remove his blocking ring. The next was to look around in the vague hope of seeing the old mage. As expected, the only people in sight were a few rather drunk customers who were being escorted back to the city by a servant or two.

Thank you for your visit, the woman at the door said with a charming smile. I hope you come again.

Thanks. Dallion smiled back. I might.

Even with everything they are capable of?

I must admit back then, certain of their specifics weren't widely known.

Another thing. What do you know about mages?

Mages? Abysmal people. They walk on a cloud of snobbery that causes everything around them to decay. Is there anything specific you'd like to know?

What are the chances of finding one in Nerosal?

Normally, none. But with the festival approaching, I suspect you'll see one or two. The countess usually has one by her side. Maybe a few will come from the Imperial Capital, if they could be bothered. Despite its size, Nerosal isn't viewed as particularly special when it comes to the empire.

So, there's no chance I'd bump into one just walking about.

That's good, because I just bumped into one in there. And he tried to scorch me.

Chapter 240: Echo Network

Getting back to the inn was much easier than getting out. To Dallion's relief, no one had noticed that had gone anywhere. Harp had failed to get Jiroh's attention, which meant he didn't have to worry about grumpiness. On the flip side, there was no chance of finding anything more about the mage as well.

According to Nil, it all had to be an elaborate hoax. Mages as he claimed never bothered threatening people. When they wanted to send a message, they did so openly with exceeding force and humiliation. The last time something of the sort had happened in Nerosal had been over a decade ago, when a group of mage apprentices from the Academy had come to the city for some fun and gotten into a bar fight. During the fight, someone managed to strike a mage in the face. The person who had done so was awakened, and that hadn't helped in the least. The apprentice had burned out the entire tavern only to scorch the person in question, then used his magic to heal everyone else and rebuild the building to its former state.

No crime had been reported that day. Neither the city guard nor the local nobles had said a thing, sweeping the whole incident under the rug. The guild of the awakened had promptly expelled the person from their organization and transported him to the nearest shrine of the Order where he could heal.

The echo's logic was flawless, however, there was one small detail that Dallion had chosen not to share: the mage was from Earth. Like Dallion and his grandfather, he had somehow found his way to this world and managed to gain quite the rare skill. That had to be the reason that Dallion had gotten away with nothing more than a warning. Despite personal plans, they shared one and the same bond, stranded in a fantasy world without any explanation. The only people Dallion had met had done pretty well for themselves: his grandfather had gone on to become a noble, and the mysterious old man was a mage. That gave Dallion hope that he would also amount to something great. What if the Star was also from Earth, though?

The thought made Dallion's stomach churn with revulsion. Something terrible must have happened to deform a person to such a state. After all, the Star himself had said he was extremely powerful,

second only to the Moon. Could it be he was the first Earthling to appear in this world? The thought was outright terrifying. Still, Dallion had to admit that even Arthurows had made him a similar offer: back off and Ill leave you alone. Did that prove anything?

I can still try to find him.

Find a mage in this world? You cant find a member of the mirror pool without help. What chance do you have with a mage?

I have the kaleidervisto.

At that single moment, both Dallion and his echo grinned. This wasnt just a matter of him finding a tool to locate a copyette, it was a way to see echoes in everything around, and that was worth exploring.

The first thing Dallion tried was to look at his reflection in the mirror. According to basic physics, that was supposed to be enough to let him see the echoes within his own realm. Sadly, as it turned out, the laws of physics were somewhat shifty when it came to magic. As he looked at the mirror, the only thing he saw was the rough outline of the mirror itself or rather something that had been forgotten in the mirror.

To Dallions shock and surprise, there was nothing less than an echo already there. The echo probably belonged to one of the previous tenants of the rooma red-haired woman in her thirties, if the echo was any indication. It appeared that the woman had placed an echo in the mirror half a decade ago and simply forgotten about it. Since then, the echo had been living a mostly boring life along with the guardian of the object.

Hearing that made Dallion feel bad more than anything else, to the point that he offered to move the echo out and into a new realm. As it soon turned out, this wasnt the only echo forgotten in the room. Apparently, a lot of the awakened were slob, scattering echoes and forgetting about them. There were two more echoes in the furniture, one in the rooms lantern, and one in the door. There were no echoes in the bed, thankfully, but having five echoes laying about was alarming enough.

Nil insisted to simply kill them off, referring to the process as cleaning. To his astonishment, the echoes didnt seem against the idea, some even welcomed it, but Dallion was firmhe was going to find a way to get them out of there and into some place else.

The more Dallion used the artifact, the worse things got. It soon turned out that his room wasnt the only place infested with echoes. The inn was practically swimming with them. There were echoes in chairs, in tables, in cutlery, causing Dallion to wonder what sort of awakened would place an echo in food utensils.

The good news was that neither Hannah nor the Luors had any echoes. At one point, Dallion even sneaked into the kitchen to check on Aspan and found things to be in order there.

Initially, Dallion considered shaking his findings with the innkeeper. After a brief moment of reflection, though, he decided against it. At best, Hannah was going to say that it wasnt an issue since the item guardians were doing the same thing, and there was no getting rid of them; and at worst she was going to have him kill every echo in the inn, which wasnt something Dallion was

willing to do. The compromise was to leave things as they were until Dallion passed his next awakening gate when supposedly he would be able to move echoes between realms. In theory he had the option to invite them to his realm and keep them there, but that wasnt something Dallion or anyone linked to him was willing to do.

After breakfast, and the usual grumbling from Hannah, Dallion and the Luors went to the guild to do some jobs before the lunch shift.

Will you seriously stop doing that? Gloria said from the corner of her mouth. People are staring.

People are always staring, Veil shrugged. The fact that most in the neighborhood, and the city itself, had gotten used to the Luors presence hadnt diminished their interest.

I was just checking something. Dallion lowered the kaleidervisto. Most of the streets had less to lose echoes, although upon passing by an inn, tavern, or shop frequented by awakened, a few would usually pop out.

If the city nobility were able to see the state of things, it was very likely that they would hire at all guilds to de-echo the city and all the buildings.

Did your grandfather ever talk about magic? Dallion asked all of a sudden.

Not particularly, Gloria said. Dallion could tell she was lying by the new set of emotions that started ringing in her. He said that there still were people with magic in the cities and thats why we had to keep away.

There were some notes in his books, Veil added. But the old man burned them up pretty quick. I managed to take a glance before that. Just a lot of pictures and symbols.

A lot of pictures and symbols. That was quite similar to what Dallion had seen when mending the brooch.

I guess he fancied learning magic at some point, even if you cant.

Maybe he was hoping hed get the stat at some point.

You dont get stats, Gloria said darkly. Maybe things were different in the past, but what was taken away cannot be returned.

Maybe. Anyone else mention anything? Dallion persisted. One of the merchants that visited you, or

No one said anything about magic. Gloria quickened her pace, rushing deliberately forward.

Dallion tried to catch up, but he soon felt Veils hand on his shoulder.

Give her some space. Shes been cranky lately. All to do with her theatre thing.

You know about that? Dallion whispered.

Sure, I do. Do you think Im an idiot? The blond frowned. Of course I do, and thats not the only thing I know. You helped, didnt you?

Dallion didnt reply. The only thing in his mind was the question: how much did Veil really know? Also, had he found out on his own or had the mirror pool approached him. It definitely sounded like something they would do.

Dont worry, its fine. Veil gave Dallion a pat on the back. Shell find that she doesnt have the skill level for it and give up. At least this way shell have no regrets.

This was a dark thing to say. Dallion wanted to continue the conversation, but given how close they were to the Icepicker guildhall, he decided to leave it for later when they were somewhere more private.

The number of people at the guild was half the usual amount. With the festival approaching, more and more had to focus on other jobs. Even the elites were spending less and less time.

Every fiber of his body screamed for him to behave as normally as possible, however, curiosity got the upper hand forcing the kaleidervisto back in front of his right eye. Almost in fear, Dallion looked around the entrance of the guild. To his relief, there were no echoes to be seen.

That thing still? Veil shook his head.

Just checking stuff.

Right. Well, Ill be off to help out in a few jobs. See you at lunch.

Yeah, yeah.

Dallion? Falkner's voice asked beside him.

Instinctively, Dallion turned around, the vase-like artefact still in front of his face. When he did, he was just as surprised as he was when looking at the mirror in his room.

Falkner had echoes in him, and more than one. Dallion was able to count at least half a dozen before the boy pushed the artifact to the side.

Six Dallion managed to say.

I need to talk to you about something, Falkner interrupted. It seemed he knew what the kaleidervisto did and was also quite worried about it. Fear rang throughout him, emitting a sound like a tuning fork.

Sure. It wasnt like Dallion had any jobs he had to take. Here?

The boy nodded. Dallion offered his free hand. Moments later, Falkner grabbed it.

ITEM AWAKENING

The item they had entered, according to the blue rectangle, was a Locket. Even so, it was a very impressive locket. For one thing, it was made from sky silver. For another, it was level ten. Despite that, the realm itself looked like some kind of a memorial hall with large portraits covering the walls. Most of them had a silver frame. Some had a glowing golden one.

Quite the place, Dallion said.

Its a gift from my aunt, the boy said. Im required to always carry it with me.

That doesnt sound fun.

Its not. Falkner looked away. Please dont tell anyone what you saw.

You know what a kaleidervisto is?

My father knows what it can do. That means I know as well, when he deems it necessary to tell me.

Hes one of those who saw inside me. The rest are tutors my family hired to teach me. Each of them has an echo of my own in their realms back home. That way they can follow my progress as well as be apprised of everything Im doing here.

Your family is spying on you?

No, they arent spying, they just want to ensure my well-being. There are a lot of expectations riding on me, so they must be sure that Im going in the right direction. Thats why I have their echoes and they have mine.

Thats not what I wanted to talk to you about

I know what you want to talk to me about, Dallion said. Among the layers of confusion, fear, and pragmatism visible in Falkners chest, there was also a ball of love and it was as big as a grapefruit.

Of course. Your music skills would tell you Still, I must ask openly. Will you help me with this?

Look, I really dont think itll work. Ive talked to her and

I wont ask you to use your music skills on her, Falkner interrupted. It wont build a stable relationship. I want you to keep her same for a few years until I earn my title.

Dallion swallowed. Thanks to the Stone Garden job, he had read up somewhat on nobles and etiquette. What Falkner was referring to was his twenty-first birthday. Legally, it was at that age that he would move from being a son of a noble to a full noble himself. The celebration required that he reach a certain level by then. Even so, it was pretty much a given that he would earn his title upon fully coming of age.

Youre really serious about this, arent you?

I am. If the Moons are willing and Gloria hasnt found anyone by then, Ill do all in my power to have her join my family.

You know, a few years is a lot of time.

I dont have a choice. My father has forbidden me to attempt now. When I become of age, I wont have to obey him any more in such matters.

Wow. That sounds really depressive.

Its the way of the world, dear boy. Nothing that could be done about it.

Then one day Ill do something about it!