

Leveling up 241

Chapter 241: City Guard Visit

From the brief conversation he'd had with Falkner and the much longer one with Nil afterward that was the only conclusion he could reach. Apparently, all noble children had echoes placed in them around the age of three. This wasn't done out of malice, but to ensure that they got the best guidance in life. There was someone always watching what they did, whispering advice, encouraging good behavior and discouraging bad.

Nil explained that it was no different from having a governess or nanny take care of a child, and for a world in which every object knew what the people around it were doing, maybe it wasn't. But Dallion still felt a bitter aftertaste when thinking about it.

As the child grew, more and more echoes were added: tutors, trainers, bodyguards whose duty it was to protect the realm from any interference. Then, at a certain point, their parents would place their echoes in the realm as well. The last made Dallion particularly uncomfortable. There were too many things he was glad that his parents had never knew.

Sometimes, I really can't understand you, dear boy. You do so well in some aspects and yet in others, you're a complete mess. You seem to have forgotten everything I said about fundamentals.

The fundamentals of life are different. There's no changing that.

Technically, that was correct. Then again, Dallion was very much relieved he had a blocker ring he could use whenever he wanted.

Hey, Dal. Spike waved. What are you hanging around the guild for? Don't you have a tournament or something?

Still waiting. Dallion rushed to the elite. They said they'll let me know when my fight is scheduled. For now, it's just a lot of waiting.

That's why I prefer bar fights. Faster and much more fun. Plus, there's the added bonus that win or lose I always get a drink afterwards.

That didnt sound in the least attractive, but it had turned out quite well for Spike. The man was quite famous, or infamous rather. There wasnt a tavern or inn that didnt know about him, not to mention he was a regular with the city guard. As Nil liked to say, Spike was among that type of person that caused a lot of trouble, but got excused because of his roguish charm and raw skill. It was also the reason that no other guild in the city would take him.

Have you seen Vend? Ive been trying to get in touch, but his echo has been vague.

Oh, probably off on another of his secret missions with March.

Dallion blinked. That wasnt the way information on secret missions had to be shared.

Dont look at me like that. Its no secret that March is doing some hush-hush stuff. Everyone knows it, we just dont know what it is. The other captains are no different.

Adzorg goes on secret missions? That was shocking to the point that Dallion could barely believe it.

Well, everyone except him. And the guild administration. Unsure about the guild master, though. I dont see him much.

Come to think of it, Dallion had only seen the guild master briefly and from a distance. The same could be said pretty much for the other top shots. His Earth brain was okay with it. After all, you didnt get to see the CEO in a company just like that.

Hell probably be back in a day or two. March hates wasting time. On that note, did you get to be invited to her inner circle?

More like outer circle, Dallion snorted. And no. Hopefully, in a few days.

Well thats life for youyou wait for eternity for something to happen, then it all crashes down on you at once. Thats why I like bar fightsits much simpler. You fight when you want to, stop when you want to give or take. No fuss, no waiting.

Spike, do weird things happen during fights? Dallion subtly changed the subject, adding just enough of curiosity in his voice to the elite to become intrigued without suspecting anything.

All the time. The other laughed.

No, I mean like really weird. Like finding a disguised noble, or someone not from the Empire, or even a mage

I fight nobles all the time. Theyre quite fun. At least with them, the fight lasts longer. As for outsiders and mages, fat chance of getting any of those in Nerosal.

I heard that a mage got into a fight a while back and caused a huge ruckus.

Oh, not that story again, Spike sighed. Well, yeah. That happened. But chances of that happening again are like he waved his hands in the air. Really really low.

But you know about the story? Dallion moved closer.

Pretty much everyone in the city knows that story, or a version of it. Which version do you know? Did the mage set the inn on fire?

Yeah. Dallion nodded. Then he put it back together again and healed everyone except for

The version with a moral. The elite shook his head. A huge fight with lots of damage and destruction in which miraculously everyone ended up fine. Even the guy who was cast out eventually got well, am I right?

Dallion didnt say a thing.

Believe that if you want, but the truth is always harsh and boring. An awakened who thought he was a big shot got in a fight with an apprentice mage. The mage won, the awakened didnt and was kicked out of the city without an emblem or a name. Thats it.

So there werent any killed or dead?

As I said, harsh and boring. Whats the point in killing or destroying? The tavern suffered, but not more than usual. And it was repaired after the fight, though not by the mage. That miserable creep left the city with all his friends as fast as his legs would hold him. Get this, he wasnt scared about displeasing the lord Mayor, but was terrified what his family might think. Nobles. Am I right?

I guess you

Hello there, a deep male voice came from the lobby entrance.

Three city guards were standing there, all in their official armor. Dallion vaguely recognized one of them from Euryales workshop. The insignia and armor decorations made it clear he was a lieutenant. The ones along with him were standard city guards, completed with the slightly annoyed expression of someone who had been walking about the city all day.

Heya, guys. Spike waved. Clearly, he had been taken by the guard enough times to become acquitted with the people in question. What was it this time?

Not today, Spike, the lieutenant said. Were here for him. He glanced at Dallion.

Me? Dallion blinked.

The overseer wants a word with you.

Damn, Dal, Spike said with a touch of awe and envy. What sort of trouble did you get yourself into?

None that I know, Dallion lied.

Whats an overseer?

An overseer, dear boy, is the last person you want to have a talk with. One piece of advice, dont lie as blatantly, and under no circumstances use music or splitting when talking to her.

Okay, but what is an overseer?

Come along, please, the lieutenant urged Dallion. We dont have all day.

As it turned out, an overseer was the closest thing an ordinary person could get to a noble. In theory, the overseer had no direct authority. She could only advise the captains what to do. She didnt have any direct subordinates, taking more the role of a general advisor that also reported to the lord Mayor when things got really out of hand. Normally, her involvement was minimal, increasing during the festival and in times of crisis. Her place of residence wasnt in any of the city guard forts. Actually, the overseer had her own house that was on the edge of the nobles district. Dallion remembered getting a glance when he had gone with Vend to Lady Marigold.

The city guards didnt say a word as they escorted Dallion to the house. And despite his burning curiosity, Dallion decided it would be best not to antagonize them. There was always the chance all this was one big misunderstanding. As they said, there was no need to volunteer free info they could use against him.

So, youre Eurys latest? the lieutenant asked out of nowhere, as they waited in front of the overseers door. I saw you at her workshop.

Disappointing. That girl never had luck with men. Lets hope youre not as bad as her last.

Dallion was just about to ask for some clarification, when the door opened, revealing a new city guard this time a captain.

Ill take it from here, lieutenant, the captain said.

There was no salute, no explanations, nothing but a nod from the lieutenant, who then simply turned around and walked away. In his mind, Dallion made a run for it. Given his current level of body and acrobatic skills, there was a good chance that he managed to flee before any of the guards managed to catch up. Why, though? If they wanted, the local nobles could find him anywhere and it wasnt like he was in good enough relations with the mirror pool to rely on them for help.

This way, the captain ended Dallions train of thought.

The entire first floor of the building turned out to be one giant room. Whatever internal walls there were had been knocked down, leaving nothing by the foundation columns. A single set of stone stairs lead to the floor above.

Without additional explanation, the captain led him up to the only door of the second floor. After knocking a few times, he opened the door for Dallion to enter and closed it immediately afterwards. The room was completely dark, with no windows whatsoever. The only light came from a green lantern placed on a small round table a short distance away.

Thanks to his improved perception, Dallion was able to see that there were quite a few pieces of other furniture in the room, as well as a rather large bookcase stretching along two walls, at least.

Excuse the darkness, a female voice said. Light causes me pain. Please, sit at the table.

There were two chairs present, both of them empty.

Go ahead, it doesnt matter which you pick.

Thank you, maam, Dallion said and went to the nearest. After a moments hesitation, he switched to the other chair and sat down. As he did, a tall female figure emerged from the room. This was the

first time Dallion had felt her presence, suggesting not only that she was an awakened, but that her level was vastly greater than his.

The woman was dressed in the kind of light armor an adventurer would use when walking in the wild. A veil over her entire face, hiding it from view. The colors were difficult to make out in the green light.

You're scared, aren't you? the overseer asked. Scared that you've been brought here.

A bit, yes.

You should be. Because several people who tried to do what you did have ended up dead.

Chapter 242: The Overseer

I know about your arrangement with the mirror pool, the overseer said casually. I also know about the subsequent dealings you've had with them. While your first and possibly the second dealings could be excused, the third is a different matter.

Dallion's mouth suddenly went dry. He looked around for something to drink, but there was nothing in the entire room.

Although, maybe congratulations are in order. It's been a while since anyone has won the gauntlet. As I'm sure you know, Belaal doesn't like to lose money, so he makes sure that most challengers fail in the end. You, though, she pointed at Dallion managed to mend it.

I was lucky, Dallion replied. I had the right skills.

That's what I have been hearing. You came to Nerosal with music skills. That's exceedingly rare, especially for someone who came from the middle of nowhere. Not only that, but you have gained two familiars.

Most people weren't able to see Nox, not to mention that Dallion was careful to have the crackling appear with others around in the last few weeks. The city guard must have kept a close eye on him ever since his arrival. For a medieval fantasy society, their surveillance was beyond scary. Even Earth couldn't boast anything similar.

You're wondering how I know all this, the woman asked, amused. It's not something you'll be told until you pass your next awakening gate. Even so, I could tell you if you really want to know.

Dallion swallowed.

No, he lied. I just want to help out best I can then get back to

Close to a hundred awakened have died while exploring artifacts in the last six months, the overseer interrupted. Three times more have become lost or were otherwise crippled by the Star. You, on the other hand, have managed to survive two incidents without as much as a scratch, not to mention that you're one of the few who's had an encounter with the Star and lived to tell about it.

That part, Dallion wasn't surprised that she knew. Considering the significance of the event, it was no wonder the guild had shared the information with the nobles and the city guard. Come to think of

it, Dallion should have expected a talk like this much sooner. If something of this scale had happened back on Earth, there would have been at least half a dozen agencies questioning him. The medieval nature of this world had made Dallion completely disregard such a possibility. Hopefully, that was all he was disregarding.

Tell me what happened in the realm of the ring, the overseer said.

The ring?

Mister Darude, the mirror pool aren't the only ones with secrets. The powers in whose shadow they hide have far more reach, otherwise our roles would have been reversed. You were asked to explore a ring, and since you're here to talk about it, you were successful. What I want to know is what happened inside.

Well I fought an island snake, Dallion said. I mean a snake made of islands. Its name was Vermillion.

Details?

I used my familiar to fly up in the air and

Details about Vermillion. Did he do or say something of interest?

The question was spot on, as if the overseer knew what the answer was. It was clear that she didn't, though. Dallion had been in the room for a few minutes and he already knew that the woman wasn't one to waste time. She said precisely what she needed to make a point and expected straight and direct answers in return.

Vermillion said that a copyette is on the loose, Dallion said and waited.

He was expecting an immediate reaction the woman starting a monologue, describing how this was the last puzzle piece of a conspiracy, or shouting orders for the captain to follow, or even bursting out in a series of swears. Instead, she did nothing.

Anything else? she asked after several seconds of silence.

Err that we were too late? Dallion replied, uncertain. He had just said the vital piece of information. If she wasn't interested in that, what was she looking for? You knew about the copyette?

If the guard had known about that, the appropriate actions would have been taken earlier. There was a sense of amusement coming from the woman, along with a touch of pride that quickly faded away. However, that doesn't explain the effect the artifacts are having on awakened. You're in a relationship with the gorgon. You should know what I'm talking about.

Dallion nodded. He knew a few things, even if Eury flatly refused to give any details. For the most part, so did Nil.

What makes it particularly disturbing is that a member of the Order has been killed.

The news rattled Dallion, just as much as he thought the news of the copyette would have rattled the overseer.

The same one who was with you during your meeting, the overseer went on. You see, the mirror pool have their secrets, but when pressed they share a bit. There were six people during the exploration that day: you, a fury mercenary, three members of the pool, and a member of the Order of the Seven Moons. The fury is in the wind, the pool has been reluctant to give up their members, and the member of the Order is dead. That leaves you.

If Dallion had any doubt that there was something big going, that doubt was now gone. The overseer had practically spelled it out for him: if someone was to mess with an organization as major as the Order of the Seven Moons, there had to be an extremely important reason. This was more than missing off a city, or even an entire province. The Orders power matched that of the Imperial Family. Now and again, there were whispers that it could be even greater. After all, the Emperor only ruled everything in his realm, while the Order went beyond, spreading into other countries.

There was one more thing, Dallion said. The ring transformed into a key once its destiny was fulfilled. The woman from the Order took it, I think.

Thats interesting.

It hasnt been found, has it?

It wouldnt be. The Order wont share what is theirs, and if the mirror pool went into all the trouble to get it, neither would it.

There was someone else there as well, Dallion added. I dont think he was from the pool or the Order. He paused, gauging the womans interest. He had one of those disfocus things. I cant remember what he looked or sounded like. For all I know it might have not been a man.

Go on.

Thats pretty much it. I just found it weird that of all the people he would keep his identity hidden, especially when the cleric didnt.

Did he seem to be the one giving the orders?

No, I dont think so. Dallion tried to remember back. He didnt give or take orders he was just there.

How many people know about this? Other than your guardians and echoes?

A few Its not something I wanted known. Especially with

Gloria and Veil involved, the woman finished the sentence for him. Better keep it that way. In fact, Id appreciate it if you dont tell anyone of the nature of our conversation here either.

But my guardians If Dallion knew it was going to be one of those talks, he would have put his blocking ring on.

Im not worried about them. Im concerned about you. You have that annoying tendency to keep secrets while blabbering about everyone elses. Naivety and recklessness is a really terrible combination. Lets hope that leveling up will help you fix that.

Yes, maam.

And just to make clear the seriousness of the situation, I know more about you than most in the city. Your skills, your gear, your arrangements, your past.

Dallions eyes widened.

I know about your grandfather, Mister Darude. And I know what he did to end up back in that small, insignificant village. Unless youre prepared to have everyone else know as well, I expect you to cooperate with me, and the first step is to keep your mouth shut.

She knew about his grandfather? An influx of mixed feelings went through Dallion. On the one hand, he was glad that there was someone who could shed some light on the old mans past. That could answer a lot of questions Dallion had, especially everything he wanted to know about level limiting and chainlings. On the other hand, if people found out Dallion was the grandson of an outcast, and possibly criminal, things could get pretty ugly for him.

Im glad you understand. If you wont mind leaving now. Theres a lot I must think about.

Sure. Dallion stood up. Youll probably expect me to start spying on people now and bringing you information.

Not in the least. Youre too much of a risk. As I said nave and reckless. If theres something I need to know, Ill get you here, and rest assured it will be very public, just like this time.

Since he had arrived in this world, Dallion had experienced his fair share of threats, both direct and subtle. The overseer was much better at this than most. He wasnt even sure what exactly her threat was, but knew he didnt want to find out.

Quietly, he made his way to the door and left the room. The captain was waiting for him on the staircase. No words were exchanged. The guard gave him a dubious look, then moved aside so Dallion could leave the building. That marked the end of Dallions first meeting with Nerosals overseer by far not the most pleasant experience, though one that had told him a few things. On the woman had all but confirmed that the copyette was indeed in the city. The city guard was doing something about it behind the scenes, but were yet to be successful.

Another thing the woman had let slip was that she was carefully following all Star activity within the city. She had known about all instances involving the Star and star spawn creatures, yet nothing about the chainling Dallion had hunted before coming here.

The last thing that Dallion had learned was more of an implied supposition based on the direction of the questions asked; the overseer suspected a connection between the Star and the copyette.

The Star wanted to take over the world and replace the Moons.

Dear boy, intuition cannot replace wisdom. The Star never wanted to have a race take over the world. The whole point was for the race to fail while creating decades of bloodshed and chaos in the meantime.

Whats the point of that?

Sometimes when you cant have the thing someone else has, the best you can do is break it.

Can the Star be trying again?

I think you lost me there.

The copyette in question had to be pretty capable in order to be kept locked up.

Theres no evidence for that. A Vermilion is hardly a strong guard. Nowadays, sure, but centuries ago

A preparation for more copyettes returning to the world. What better way to have someone blend in, if the person they impersonate is affected in some fashion before that? If success is not the end goal, what better way to create a situation in which one copyette can free others and have them take the place of awakened affected by explorations?

Are you saying everyone who was lost is, in fact, a copyette?

Not yet, but when the copyette figures out how to use the key he stole, they will be, and no one will be able to tell the difference without a kaleidervisto.

Chapter 243: Final Warning

Lunch was way over by the time when Dallion reached the inn. Both Luors had gone by then and Jiroh was out buying supplies for the week. Hannah, however, remained. The moment Dallion stepped in the inn, she gave him a look screaming disappointment. At that moment Dallion knew he was doomed.

Aspan, heat up some leftovers! the innkeeper shouted.

Hannah doesnt kick out. If she wanted you out, youd find all your possessions ready for you downstairs. Or outside if you really pissed her off.

I dont have all day, Dal, Hannah raised her voice.

Dallion saw no other option than to join her at the bar. The seat he took was the same he had sat in upon arriving in the inn for the first time. Back then, he had been applying for a job. One meeting with the city guard overseer and he felt he would have to go through the entire process yet again. Nil might have said that he wasnt kicked out, but then again, he hadnt said that Dallion was guaranteed to stay.

What did I tell you when you came here? the innkeeper asked.

No eating in the room, no sex, nothing

That would get you in trouble with the city guard, she finished for him. You work for your room and board, plus get a little extra based on how well you do. Clear simple rules, and still you manage to make a mess.

There were reasons I had to

I guess congratulations are in order. There's one rule which you didn't break eating in your room.

The implication was clear, filling Dallion with a deep sense of guilt, but also surprise. Before he could say anything in his defense possibly adding a note of calm through his music skills Hannah went to the kitchen, then came back with a tray of food that she slammed in front of Dallion.

Eat up, she said with a sigh.

After a moment's hesitation, Dallion picked up the fork.

Did you think I wouldn't notice what you were doing in the room? With Eury no less. All this time and the girl hasn't changed one bit. The sad thing is that you thought the same.

Dallion opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Hannah raised a finger, indicating it would be a terrible idea if he did.

I know about all the times she sneaked an ex in her room, just as I know about everything else that happens in my inn. Your friends know that, that's why they didn't try anything while they were here. What they do outside is their business, within reason. And that's not to say I approve of Gloria getting messed up with the mirror pool. The only reason you're not out on the street is because your hairbrained scheme was aimed to help her.

You know about the mirror pool?

Dal, I've had awakened come and go ever since I bought this place. The reason I'm still in business is that I'm good at noticing things and keeping quiet about it. Like your other dealings, for example.

What other dealings?

The innkeeper snorted. Dallion didn't need to create other instances of himself to know that she was referring to Clouds visits, and those of the general's servants. The fact that he hadn't caught on was impressive enough; the fact that Hannah hadn't pointed it out till now was outright terrifying.

Well? Hannah asked.

What? Dallion blinked. He didn't expect to react with a question.

You were going to give me an explanation, and considering you haven't been the worst tenant, I owe you that much. So out with it.

Was this how someone felt when facing an awakened with the ability to split? Dallion felt as if a large part of the conversation had taken place, but was cut out from his memory. Was there such an awakened skill? Hopefully not.

Slowly, he looked around. The room was empty. The only other person in the entire inn was Aspan, and a few potential tenants who had rented rooms early for the upcoming festival. Even so, Dallion didnt feel comfortable talking in the open.

Can we go into a realm? he asked in hope.

The innkeeper shook her head.

Theres something dangerous on the loose, Dallion said. The overseer wanted to learn what I knew on the matter.

Thats all you can give me?

Yes. Dallion replied.

Are you sure?

This was what it felt like being between a rock and a hard place. The overseer wouldnt be at all happy if he shared anything about the copyette. At the same time, there was the very real danger that Hannah would kick him out if he didnt. As far as she was concerned, he had already broken several of her rules. Trying to act like a wiseass, which was what he was giving the impression of right now, could turn out to be the final straw.

Im sure.

It wasnt what the innkeeper wanted to hear, but at the end of the day, that was his choice and he was willing to accept the consequences.

Fine. The woman looked away. Seems like youve made your decision, and Ill make mine. You need freedom to do what you want? You have it. Cost of the room is a gold per week. Food is still included, but if you eat up there, youll clean it up. Then youll be free to do whatever youre doing. No visitors upstairs and you do all your fun and games outside. If you get into any trouble, its on you.

The speech was new, but it was pretty much what Dallion expected. In effect, he was being kicked out, but he at least was offered to pay for his room, like any other customer. Of course, he had the option to crash at Eurys place. He did have his own key, so potentially that was a possibility. Hed have to check with her first, though. And if worst came to worst, he might ask for help at the guild.

Or, you can show me some respect for once. Hannah still wasnt looking at him. Despite her best attempts, Dallion was able to hear the hint sound of sadness resonating buried among scores of other emotions. Follow the rules, dont get in trouble, and keep on staying here as before. One more mess up, though she raised a finger, turning to look him straight in the eyes and Ill take you to the city guard myself! I dont care what youre trying to do! If youre in trouble, come to me. And by that I mean me, not dump your problems on Jiroh. The girl has enough on her mind as it is. Think you can do that?

I think I can try, Dallion said in a low voice.

For several long seconds, the innkeeper kept on looking at him, after which she looked down at his place.

I told you to eat up! You awakened are all the same! You think that you're invincible because you have a bit of power. Power without feed and practice is glass in the wind you never know what'll shatter it.

That was an interesting saying. It sounded somewhat familiar, although Dallion couldn't place it exactly. Still, at this point, it was better to finish his food without agitating her more.

So what did the old witch want from you? Hannah asked in a hushed voice. Without going into details.

Dallion almost choked. You know her? he mumbled through a mouthful of food.

Everyone knows her. They just don't like her. She's been in the city for decades, some say centuries. When she wants to have a talk with someone, it's always bad news. I had a talk with her a few times myself.

The surprise made Dallion stare at the innkeeper.

It was a while back. I was new to the city myself. She made it very clear that she didn't want any trouble from me. After that, she called me a few times to keep an eye on this person or that. Still gives me the creeps when I remember her.

It was difficult to tell, the overseer being covered from head to toe, but Dallion got the impression that she was at most in her thirties. Although, in this world, it was entirely possible there was a way for someone to live for centuries.

She asked me to help by not helping

Hannah laughed, causing Dallion to feel utterly humiliated.

First time I hear that one, but if the overseer says, who am I to argue?

What did she ask you the first time? Dallion asked in turn.

Reassurances that I wouldn't cause trouble. Completely different thing. Still, I'm surprised that she wanted to see you. If anyone, I'd thought that Veil would be the one.

Or Gloria. They're pure blonds. That's certain to attract attention in more ways than one. I'm sure that the guard and the nobles have been keeping an eye on them. As has the mirror pool, as you probably know.

I know. She told me

There was a new moment of silence as Dallion continued eating and Hannah remained deep in thought.

This danger you can't talk about. Will it affect you?

Instinctively, Dallion felt the pouch with the kaleidervisto in his belt. He had found a lot of echoes throughout the town, but nothing resembling a copyette. For the next few days, Dallion planned spending more time throughout Nerosal, although before that he had to find a way to make himself less obvious. For starters, maybe it was going to be a good idea to hang about Performers Plaza some more. A lot of people went through there, and he could show off his acrobatic and music skills to blend in.

Very much. Ill need to get a lot stronger for it. He looked Hannah in the eye. And not only in the realms.

Im not training you, Hannah said immediately.

I wasnt asking you to. That much was true, though now Dallion was starting to ask himself a few questions.

You were. The best you could do is continue your training in the guild. Theyll know whats best for you. Especially since youll be joining march. For all her faults, she has a good eye and can bring out the best of people on the battlefield. Skill wise, that is.

It was obvious that Hannah went out of her way, not to mention Eury, although she clearly knew Dallions relation with the gorgon. Still, he couldnt say those were bad ideas.

Thanks for the food, Hannah, Dallion said. And the talk.

Lets just hope you let the words enter that thick skull of yours and not bounce off like daggers off a wall.

Miracles have been known to happen. Dallion nodded with a serious expression.

Wise ass, Hannah grumbled, but even she wasnt able to fully hide her smirk.

Sorry, by the way.

For what?

For being impolite.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

As the inn changed into Dallions awakening room, a somewhat annoyed Nil entered from the corridor. Disapproval was written all over his face.

I did apologize, Dallion said.

How do you expect to be taken seriously when you dont follow basic etiquette? The echo shook his head. Awakening while eating is considered an insult in the more civilized provinces.

Considering everything going on, I thought I deserve some leniency.

If thats the way you want it, very well. Nil crossed his arms. And how exactly do you plan on completing the trial? Dont tell me you think youve learned how to swim after a few tries in the lake.

Well, its time to find out. Dallion left the room and made his way to the door leading to his next awakening trial.

Chapter 244: Dragged Down

With every step Dallion made down the corridor, his anxiety grew. He had tried reciting the names of the Moons, but this was one instance in which they had a limited effect.

Dallion didnt reply. Images of the dark murky liquid kept appearing in his mind even before he had reached the large section of the chamber.

I am in the halls of destiny, he whispered to himself as he walked on. And this time Ill defeat my flaws.

Part of his mind reminded that it was easier said than donethere was no good way to fight water. Well, almost no good way.

Thanks a lot, Nil, Dallion grumbled. In a way, this reminded him of the last instance when he had hit a wall: his fight against the sand dragon. That had been almost a lifetime ago and remained the most humiliating experience Dallion had had when it came to leveling up. He certainly hoped this wouldnt end up being similar.

The firebird appeared, grabbing Dallion by the back and lifting him up. After a few moments of hesitation, Dallion got Lux to move him forward. As before, the entire floor changed into a pool of water. It seemed so harmless from above, almost serene.

Instinct made Dallion look up out of fear that the walls and ceiling would also transform into water. Thankfully, they didnt. A sense of relief appeared in his chest, allowing him to relax for a few moments. No sooner had he done so, when the realization kicked inDallion had to enter the water for the trial to start. Last time, the trial had caught him off guard, but it had also done him a favor. Going down didnt cause him to hesitate, unlike now.

Easy for you to say

Dallion summoned his dartbow and fired a bolt in the water. The bolt disappeared, rippling the surface as it did. There were no rectangles, no sudden effects, and no decrease of the water level. More out of curiosity than anything else, Dallion summoned an ingot of iron and dropped it into the pool. There was a loud splash, but little more.

In theory, Dallion could keep on summoning ingots until the entire pool was filled up, but that was unlikely to solve the problem. In order to succeed, he had to go through this. Logic kept telling him

that there was nothing to fear, at most he would only have to redo the trial. Sadly, that wasn't enough to remove the instinct for self-preservation that screamed he go as far away from the pool of water as he possibly could.

It would have been nice to have the shield. With luck, the metal ball it managed to create could prevent water from going in. The chance would have been ridiculously small, but at least he would have had one. Now he was left with the direct plunge option.

Lux, Dallion began. After five seconds, drop me down.

The fire bird chirped, confused.

And no matter what I say, don't grab me again. I don't want to have to do this more than once. Dallion took a deep breath. Keep here, though. I'd like to keep seeing some light.

The instruction seemed sufficient, because two seconds later, the firebird just let Dallion go. There was barely any warning. The flame just bounced off, rising into the air, while Dallion went straight down, splashing into the pool feet first. At this distance, he barely felt the impact, sliding in as if it were soft jelly.

This time Dallion didn't freeze. Holding his breath, he immediately resorted to his newly learned swimming skills. Moving around turned out to be surprisingly easy. However, no matter how hard Dallion tried to reach the surface, it would always move away.

A hand grabbed Dallion by the ankle. Looking down, he could see a silhouette of darker water forming. It had the appearance of a ragged piece of cloth that had grown legs and hands just what one would imagine to be a drowned ghost.

Most people in such a situation would have frozen out of fear. Initially, Dallion did as well. However, he had seen enough horror movies back on Earth to know that a good axe, or sword, tended to be the best response.

Dallion summoned his harpsword. The weapon appeared in his hand, slicing through the water with surprising ease, as if they were made of silk and spiderwebs. One quick circular slash through the arm of the creature that had taken hold of Dallion, and the entity dissolved into the water.

The harpsword vibrated for a moment, indicating the Dallion was welcome.

Swimming was going to be a bit more difficult from now on, but at least

COMBAT INITIATED

The water around Dallion filled with creatures dressed in long rags.

That's the stuff of nightmares, Dallion thought as chills went through his body. This wasn't going to be an easy fight.

Markers appeared in the water, but when Dallion tried to follow them, he found that there was a slight distortion. This was true both for red and green markers each time he tried to match them, he kept being slightly off. Some athletic skills would have been quite useful about now.

Relying on his combat skills, Dallion ignored the markers, swinging at the nearest raggy in front of him. The action was fast, though far lower than he was used to. The attack didn't reach the enemy. Before the blade could slash the raggy in two, the creature floated back with just as much force as Dallion put in his strike. It was like trying to catch a piece of paper underwater. Circular attacks were even worse, causing all enemies around him to pull a safe distance back.

The floating entity he was targeting attempted to move back, but the blade was faster, popping it like a soap bubble. The shape lost form, transforming into a dark liquid that dispersed in the rest of the water.

Sadly, the victory was short-lived. As Dallion killed off the attacker, several more moved in from the opposite side, grabbing onto his legs and left arm. The speed at which they did that was deceptively fast, making the attack impossible to evade.

Dallion let go of the harpsword and summoned his dartbow. Using as much force as he could muster, Dallion freed his arm, then pulled away from the enemies grasp. No sooner had he popped the entities, holding his legs, when a new wave came from behind clinging to him.

The more he struggled, the more enemies clung to him, making it more and more difficult to break free. There was no pain or damage, just the sense of limitation, slowing his movements and slowly pulling him down to the bottom.

The limitation made Dallion think about all the people who had let him down to Earth. There were quite a few instances that he could have achieved greatness at least in his mind if it weren't for acquaintances quitting on him at vital moments. A glorious YouTube career had been taken away from him because of his animation partner, who had taken months to make the channel's trailer, after insisting they have one. Not only that, but he then had vanished from the face of the Earth just when Dallion needed content the most. Then there were a few high school friends with which Dallion had set out to make a game. The process had been slow and arduous, with lots of arguments. Dallion and another friend had ended up doing the work for the entire team, before his friends dropped him to join another project. Dallion had attempted to finish the project himself, but it had ended up so half-assed that even he didn't want to be associated with it.

Dozens of regretful memories went through his mind, each clinging to him with the same strength the entities were. This was Dallion's trial, not the water. The entire reason Dallion feared the water was because he actually feared being pulled down to the bottom without anyone to help. It had happened too many times in the past, even since he was a child. He felt that he was there for everyone when he needed to help out someone else, but when he was in actual trouble, no one gave a damn.

Time seemed to freeze as Dallion focused on the situation. As hopeless as things appeared, he knew that there had to be an answer; not because he thought of the trial as a puzzle, rather he refused to believe that this would end up being his limit. There were hundreds, probably thousands of awakened, beyond his level and Dallion was determined to join their ranks! He definitely wasn't going to let all the people who had dragged him down in the past drag him down again.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion summoned his harpsword again and kept on fighting. His actions were sluggish, making him feel as if he were trapped in jelly. Still, he was able to kill off several of the floaters, allowing him to swim slightly up. It was just a matter of strength. As long as he kept on fighting, no one was going to keep him down!

Raglings kept on transforming into murky water as he slayed them, but even so, their numbers kept on growing. It was as if everyone from Dallion's past had come here with the express goal of preventing him from moving on to better things.

For a moment Dallion felt as if the whole world was closing down on him, as if telling him he was not allowed to progress from his current place. The water was to be his final barrier, one that could not be crossed or broken through.

Dallion stopped. A single thought surfaced in his mind, passing through all the rest like a hot knife through butter. Why hadn't he done it on his own? If things had been as simple as he claimed, we wouldn't have needed anyone else. There would have been no one to drag him down, no one to ruin things. The truth was that Dallion had also been a clinger. Just as others had clung to him, he had relied on others to do things that he could or didn't want to do. He could have learned how to make the intro to his YouTube channel, but preferred to dump that on someone else while he focused on the cool stuff. He could have made the game on his own, instead of relying on others doing the work he didn't like. The reality was that he could have been a lot more like Veil and Gloria. What they had achieved, they had achieved on their own, but also had asked for help.

When Gloria had first approached him in the village, her level was higher, and still she needed him to defeat the awakening shrine guardian. She had relied on Dallion, just as he had relied on her, and both of them had succeeded, because they were both willing to do everything it took to win.

Dallion unsummoned his weapons.

Dallion had been told several times that he can't fight water. That was true the more he tried, the more the water fought back. But as long as he waited and went on with the flow, he could pass through it. All this time, he had attempted to keep the water and the creatures separate in order to have an easier time. There was no such thing as easier there was only reality. As long as he accepted that and took the appropriate steps to move on, there would be no limit.

Chapter 245: Maze of Emotions

It was remarkable how much a person could hold their breath underwater when relaxed, especially if that person was an awakened. When Dallion had surrendered himself mentally to the ragged water creatures, he expected they would go at him in greater numbers. They hadn't, instead slowly grabbing on to him several at a time. Moments ago, when he had struggled against them, they had seemed so fast and aggressive, Dallion had felt unable to do a thing. Now they seemed as slow as molasses. On a few instances Dallion had considered asking if he could help get things faster. In one case, he had split and tested if it would help. It hadn't.

It had taken about five minutes for Dallion to become surrounded by murky water. The creatures were so thick next to each other that they had merged into one into one giant dark blob of water surrounding Dallion completely. The entire time Dallion looked up, using Lux's light as a beacon to make sure he wasn't dragged to the bottom. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any change in his depth; apparently when Dallion had lost interest in his clingers, they had stopped being aggressive. If anything, the challenge had gotten slightly boring.

It was a good saying, although completely useless. The echo was an extremely good teacher, but he tended to rely too much on theory. Vend and Eurys hands-on methods would have been much better in a situation such as this.

I expect you don't know anything about a challenge such as this? With all of them being highly individual and all.

Actually, dear boy, I believe I went through the same a long time ago.

That was beyond surprising. It was logical that Nil had to have gone through this process himself, like any awakened. Despite that, Dallion had rarely thought about the challenges the echoor rather, its original must have gone while leveling. Learning that Adzorg had gone through a water trial meant that he knew what needed to be done for Dallion to overcome the trial. More importantly, it suggested that the captain had flaws similar to his own, making Dallion wonder who had let him down and now.

It's been a while since I've heard you this grumpy, Nil. Anything you'd like to share?

Just my strong and well-founded belief that the awakening shrines are a plague on the awakened. Great for war and showing off, but otherwise useless. Whats the point in having someone cheat their way through twenty levels in a day if it seals their fate? It takes far more strength for someone to reach level twenty-one after being in a shrine than a person who has leveled up the natural way.

Dallion could agree with that. At the moment, he was a prime example. After reaching double digits in months, he had almost given up leveling up out of fears he couldnt even rationalize. if he had the option to reach level twenty through a shrine, he would have jumped at the opportunity. Afterwards, though, it was unlikely he would have succeeded in defeating any of the echoes his realm had fabricated. Either that, or he would have exclusively relied on his familiars and weapons.

What trick had his grandfather used, though? From what Dallion knew, Aspan and his old man had been granted access to a major awakening shrine due to the wars of succession. That hadnt kept them at level twenty, though. Both had progressed on from there to the level they had reached before their punishment had limited them back to single digits.

The water surface, far above Dallion, started slowly moving away. The eight of the clingers had probably reached the point at which the blob of dark water was pulling him down, even without the attackers doing anything.

A grain of fear emerged in Dallions chest, only to be quickly crushed by him reciting the names of the Moons. It would have been far more efficient if he could sing; then not only could Dallion keep his negative emotions better in check, but it would have been easy to add some lightness to the blob, making it float up on its own.

Suddenly a thought came to Dallionhe could still use his music skill. This time and last, he had focused so much on the fact that he could not actively use the skills that he had completely forgotten they had a passive element as well.

The blob of water surrounding him transformed into a giant ball of yarn, with colors so bright that they hurt Dallions eyes.

What were all these emotions doing here? It was obvious at first glance that they were his, some going back decades: a friend stealing his crayons in elementary school, a classmate keying the screen of his new mobile phone because Dallion didnt let him cheat off him, a person that had agreed to join Dallions guild after a month of begging, only to leave it a few days later as if nothing had happened All those emotion-infused memories were here now.

Trapped in a ball of negative emotions, dragging him to the bottom of a pool of despair. This was the thing poems were made of. If Dallion had managed to word this right, it would have gotten him an A in literature class back on Earth. Right now, the bigger question was how to get free of it.

Looking closely Dallion saw that the while he was entangled in the center of thousands of strands, the strands themselves werent tied to one another. What was more, not all strands were particularly long.

It was quite tempting to grab hold of them and snap them to pieces, especially now that he could identify them. However, when Dallion tried that in another instance of himself, he found that doing so caused them to tighten around him and drag him down much faster. The only solution was for him to navigate through this maze of emotions, while being especially careful not to break any of his memories.

Snapping a memory, quite possibly, was the equivalent of burying it deep down something Dallion had done more times that he wanted to admit. Such actions were a temporary solution at best, but they didnt deal with the root of the problem. The point was to keep them and just not permit them to hurt him.

Unravelling the nearest strands proved to be easier than Dallion expected it to be, possibly because he had split into four instances of himself, trying out different approaches. Soon enough, his hands and forearms were completely free, allowing him to proceed to untangling his legs. All the time, the surface above him seemed to float further away. This time, though, Dallion wasnt worried in the least. He knew from personal experience that he had plenty of time. The only thing he had to do was not panic.

The response didnt follow immediately. In fact, the pause was so long, that when Nil did respond, he almost startled Dallion.

Layer by layer, the memory strands loosened up, allowing Dallion to swim up through them. At this point, he had completely lost track of time, not that it mattered in the least. Making his way through the strands actually felt nice, liberating in a way. If he ever managed to get back home, maybe he might enter the field of psychiatry and psychology and have an illustrious career. He would actually be helping people then. Maybe this world had its equivalent?

After what seemed like a long but rewarding journey, Dallion finally emerged from the tangled web of emotions. The water around him was clear, glimmering in a gentle blue. Looking down, the past emotions had filled the entire space beneath him, stretching like the floor of a cave.

The surface seemed exceedingly close. Dallion could clearly see the firebird flying above. Poor Lux seemed both worried and pleased to see him. When the creature received a wave, it started moving about through the entire hall like a teleporting hummingbird. It took a while and a lot of hand gestures from Dallion for Lux to calm down. Still, the bird had moved as close as possible to him, hovering mere inches above the water.

Focusing on the meager swimming skills he had learned, Dallion pushed himself up. He could feel his hands driving him up. Each stroke moved him further and further, and yet Dallion soon found that the surface wasn't approaching one bit. After a while, he glanced back down. The layer of dark water was still there, a foot away from his feet. Refusing to give up, Dallion tripled his effort. Alas, no matter how much strength he put in. After a short while, Dallion stopped.

The thought of using the strands of emotions to make a rope passed through his mind. It soon turned out, though, that tying two strands together was completely impossible. While they somehow managed to make a gooey whole, the strands remained their own entities, refusing to be chained to anything else.

Frustration built up. After minutes of futile attempts, Dallion couldn't help but hit the memories with his fist. His knuckles met something of the softness and consistency of jelly, cushioning the blow.

Easy for you to say.

Considering that Im as close to you as one might get, it should be easy for you as well.

Carefully, Dallion put the palm of his hand on the dark layer and pushed. His entire body moved slightly up.

The challenge was not merely to accept and sift through the bad memories that kept him from progressing, Dallion had to use them to go forward. And considering the qualities of the darker water, there was only one way of doing it.

I can think of a few things, but go ahead. Weirder things have happened in your head.

Ignoring the comment, Dallion jumped. It was a small jump, just enough to separate himself from the layer, and then fall back down again. Anywhere else, things would have ended here. However, in this instance, the mesh of memories acted as a trampoline, pushing him back up in the clear water.

Pleased with his discovery, Dallion let himself fall back down, only this time, he exerted more force upon jumping back up. The dark water, combined with his own effort, took him higher, and higher, and higher...

Jump after jump, the distance to the surface became less and less. Ten feet became five, then three, then two, then one. Finally, the last jump was powerful enough to allow him to break out of the pool. Lux didnt hesitate, grabbing Dallions hands the moment they emerged, and pulling his body out like an eagle dragging out a salmon from the river.

Wow there, Lux! Dallion said after he was tugged. Im not a rag doll. The little familiar was significantly stronger than Dallion had expected.

You have broken through your barrier.

Your level has increased to 17.

Choose the focus that will serve you best.

Chapter 246: Three Killed, Three Remaining

Hannah crossed her arms.

Alright, what did you do this time?

From her perspective, less than a moment had passed. In that single instant, however, successfully managed to brave another series of flaws, earning him a new level. Three more remained at the next

gate. Regardless, Dallion didnt feel he had the strength to keep pushing on just yet. A few days or rest sounded good right about now.

Oh. The innkeeper narrowed her eyes. I see Well, if you had to, you had to. Hannahs voice was calm, but Dallions music skills told him that she disapproved. Next time, he was going to take the ten extra minutes and improve in his room. What did you pick?

Huh? Dallion blinked.

Your awakening focus, the innkeeper said. You have to pick one with each level.

Oh, right. Perception.

At the moment, Dallion went back to his original plan of increasing his perception as high as possible. With him learning forging in the near futureprobably months, considering how thorough Eury was with her traininghed be relying on it quite a lot. Having a low reaction was starting to irk him, though. Sooner rather than later, Dallion would have to put a few points there as well. It was funny how originally he had started with a huge bonus in that area, allowing him to make fast decisions. Back when Dallion was level one, having six on a stat seemed unimaginably strong. Now, his reaction was at ten and it seemed pitiful.

Aspan will be pleased for one. Hannah glanced over her shoulder at the kitchen door. Hes always complaining that were wasting his talents. At least with you theres hope that your palette will be good enough at some point.

His food is always great, Ill give him that.

Dallion focused back on his meal. Hannah gave him a few pieces of advice, most of which he had already heard before, then, too, went elsewhere to deal with administrative things. That left Dallion completely alone in the empty room.

Come to think about it, that was somewhat unusual, since customers could enter at any time. Having a supernatural entity such as the overseer that monitored the entire city helped a lot to prevent potential crimes.

Finishing his meal, Dallion went to the kitchen. Nine times out of ten, Aspan would be either snoozing there, or shouting and cursingusually when engaging in a conversation with Hannah. This time, when he saw Dallion, the man quickly reached behind a stack of fruit and took out a finely arranged bowl of fruit. At first glance, it seemed like a common fruit salad that a person could make in a few minutes. The aroma coming from it told an entirely different story. The fruit wasnt just cut up and assembled, they had been boiled in a unique combination of spices.

Dallion felt his mouth water. Hunger tempted him to take the bowl instantly; instinct made him look over his shoulder just to make sure that Hannah hadnt returned.

You wont get in trouble for this, right? Dallion asked.

The cook crossed his arms, giving him the well-known you gotta be kidding glance. Deciding to risk it, Dallion went ahead and took a bite from the top piece. Normally, the fruit could be described in taste and texture as an apricot. There was no telling what Aspan had done to it, because what his taste buds felt was definitely something different. Sweet and sour mashed together with a touch of peppermint and the faint aftertaste of chocolate.

Ever since hed come into this world, the lack of sugar productschocolates in particular. And yet, Aspan had somehow managed to recreate that on his own. Now Dallion understood what Hannah meant when she said that Aspans skills were undervalued. Given his skills, he probably felt like a world-renowned chef having to work in a fast-food joint.

No sooner had Dallion started eating than the bowl was empty. He could have sworn that hed only taken a few bites, and yet reality disagreed with him. Eager for a bit more, Dallion tried to music his way into a second serving, but the only thing he got was a hearty laugh and a pat on the back.

Ill be going to Performers Plaza, Dallion said as he went into his room. Will you be okay?

A few notes from the harpsisword indicated that she would.

I know, I know. Dallion smiled, as he went to get his ring chords. Bringing a mandolin to the place was the normal thing to do, but then no one would pay attention. His goal was to attract as many people as possible and get them to notice the strange instrument. The reason for this was that one weird thing could be used to hide another.

Thats sort of what Im counting on. If I cant find the copyette, Ill have it come to me.

Dallion checked the state of the ring chord, then closed the box. That and the kaleidervisto were the only things he needed. Just in case, he also had his training stiletto a Nox dagger. Of course, the stiletto was in a state that it would receive more damage than it would inflict.

Thanks for the encouragement. Dallion put the blocking ring round the chain Eury had given him and hung it from his heck. Naturally, he made sure to hide it from view. There was no point in tempting fate in a crowded city square. Any other advice?

Take someone with you. Harp and I wont be able to help you. Ask the gorgon to come along. Shell do it for you.

She might, thats why I wont tell her, Dallion went to the door. Have fun while Im gone.

As much as Dallion put up a brave front, he knew that the shield was right. Leaving himself open like that was an invitation for trouble. The copyette could easily walk to him and stab him in the

heart, then disappear in the surrounding crowd under another face. That was the thing Dallion was most worried about: stabbings. With his current stats, projectiles were becoming less and less of an issue.

Any reason given?

None that I could share. I can only assure you that it's not linked with any of your troubles.

It was roughly half an hour to the Plaza. However, Dallion had to make a long detour before that. It had been over a day since he'd gone to see Eury. Given her connection to the city guard, it was almost certain that she had heard about his recent adventure. At this point, the best solution was to tell her what had happened before she could ask. Also, there was a favor he was going to ask her several favors, in fact, some of which she wouldn't appreciate.

The high-pitched sound of a home-made rocket filled the air, as a single firework shot up above Nerosal, exploding in a bouquet of multicolored lights. This was the first firework Dallion had seen in this world, and yet none of the people around seemed particularly impressed. According to Nil, this was a sign that the festival was nearing, as well as a reminder that there would be an imperial present.

Since only the imperial family was allowed to use rockets and fireworks, Countess Priscord had come up with a rather ingenious way to add some flare to her festival. Officially, the fireworks display was in honor of the imperial, who by pure chance accepted her invitation, dragging his ass all the way to a barely significant county. For that honor, the imperial—the least important of the entire household, would be treated as the emperor himself. After all, only the emperor and his immediate family could order a fireworks display in the empire.

The scheme was absolutely brilliant. The cynical way in which Nil explained it all made it all the better to listen to.

The fireworks briefly made Dallion think of Cleric and the dame that had taken him on the chainling hunt. Knowing what he knew now about how the world—or rather the Tamin Empire—worked, Dallion could see what a privilege he had been granted. A noble of her stature would never speak to a semi-awakened in normal circumstances. The fact that she had encouraged both him and Gloria was the equivalent of a business mogul joining a game server with random strangers, then offering to hire them as part of his business empire. Maybe Gloria and Veil were at a slight advantage thanks to their hair, but Dallion wasn't.

Eury's workshop was surprisingly packed when Dallion got there. Thankfully, they weren't guards this time, but rather, a group of various guild-members that had come to collect their blossoming armor. Dallion was able to spot at least three emblems. The only logical assumption he could make was that he'd probably fight some of those during his preliminary rounds—only people that would battle in an awakened realm would need blossoming armor and not the real thing.

After patiently waiting outside for three quarters of an hour, the last of Eury's clients had gone, finally letting him go inside.

Hi, Dal, Euryale said the instant he walked in without even turning around. You didnt have to wait outside, you know.

I thought it would be better if I let you finish your work before I came in. Dallion made a step forward.

Already he could feel she was more than a little upset at him. This wasnt the greeting hed normally get, even if Dallion couldnt hear any emotions coming from her.

Before he could say another word, the gorgon briskly turned around. She had her blocker ring on.

Youre lucky Im not in the habit of slapping men, she said, shames moving furiously about her head.

What did I

Didnt I tell you not to get involved with the mirror pool? she grabbed him by both arms just beneath the shoulders. Do you think this is a joke? Those people are dangerous. Even the nobles are cautious when they deal with them. And you just walk in the dragons gen and start making demands?

I

Playing the gauntlet? Messing with Belaal? People have disappeared for less. And worst of all, I had to learn that from the damned city guard!

This was the first time Dallion had heard Eury come close to swearing. Normally she was calm and composed, and almost always flirty.

Just because you did them a small favor doesnt mean they feel like they owe you something. The only reason Belaal met you was to satisfy his personal curiosity. Now, youve gone on his list. Itll take a lot of work to get you off it.

This time Dallion didnt say a word. That proved to be the right choice.

And all for what? To go hunting for a copyettea member of the race that nearly conquered the entire world? Please, tell me, if you manage to find it, what exactly are you going to do?

Point at it so everyone else can see? Dallion said, adding some humor to his words.

The joke wasnt even funnyor a real jokebut thanks to his music skills, that didnt matter. Eurys frown softened a bit. In his mind, Dallion could see her trying to balance her anger and fear with the humor he had created. The long silence suggested a stalemate.

Idiot. Euryale let go of him and went back to her workbench. If theres a way to get in trouble, youll find it. I might as well be going out with a hurricane.

Dallion had no idea whether that was a compliment or not, and he had no intention of asking.

You heard about my meeting with the overseer? Subtly, he changed the topic.

Who do you think told me about the mess you got yourself into? The overseer knew that you wouldnt let things stay. The witch counted on it. Otherwise she would have just taken your kaleidervisto.

Does that mean you'll help me? He took a step forward. A bit at least?

You beautiful idiot she shook her head. The overseer knew I would. Otherwise she wouldn't have told me all this.

Wow.

However, I'm not sure, I'll be enough.

What do you mean?

Two members of the mirror circle were killed recently. One was a low-level grunt. The other was the fury that mugged you.

Chapter 247: Slime Bolts

Two members of the mirror pool dead along with the member of the Order that made three. All of them had been present when Dallion had cleared Vermilion's ring. There was the possibility for it all to be a coincidence. The Order's main job was to fight the Star and all of its spawn, and the underworld was known for its high and violent turnover. Deep inside, though, Dallion knew that it was all related to the ring. The thought scared him, though not as much as he thought it would.

There were six in total, Dallion said. He had also put on his blocking ring. What was more he had used the kaleidervisto to look throughout the workshop and the items there. With the exception of a few pieces of armor needing repair, everything else was deprived of echoes. Myself, the fury, the tattooed guy, some grunt I'd never seen before, the woman from the Order, and someone with disfocus.

Killing a fury. That was probably the scariest thing of all. Dallion had seen firsthand how furies fought. He himself had tried it only to get seriously wounded. Even now, he probably wouldn't stand a chance on his own; not in the real world in any event.

The tattooed guy is gone as well, Dallion continued after a while. When I went to the Drum, I was supposed to meet with him. Instead, I met with Belaal and his fury.

You think he's dead as well?

I've no idea. I thought things had changed because he'd lost his tavern. That seems to be a mark of status in the pool.

If the tattooed was dead that left only two people: Dallion and the person with disfocus. Originally, it had been that person who had brought the ring. Maybe it was his to begin with. At this point Dallion could only guess.

So what do you plan on doing now? Euryale asked.

Find the copyette before it finds me? I have this. Dallion took out the kaleidervisto from the pouch on his belt. I was hoping you could make me something to make it less recognizable.

Euryale looked at the artefact. While it was the size of a flask, not much could be done to hide it. It was too large to be made into a spyglass, and too fragile to be modified.

Any ideas?

One. Can you make a mirror? But without glass.

The gorgon sighed.

Right. Well, I want you to make a box for it. It doesn't have to be big, just large enough to have the device and a mirror inside.

I don't get it.

The biggest issue is that I have to hold it in front of me all the time. But if there is a mirror at a forty-five degree angle, I'll be able to look from above. That way no one will suspect a thing. They'll think I'm looking in some weird box.

Dal Euryale sighed. That won't work. The kaleidervisto will only show you the first thing it sees. You'll see the mirror, not the image the mirror reflects.

The gorgon's comment came as a surprise. It meant that she had owned such a device at some point, or at the very least was aware how it functioned.

That's true, but I won't be reflecting that image. The mirror will be in front of the device, so the only thing I'll reflect is the kaleidervisto itself.

If it were possible to show the state of smugness, Dallion would be beaming as bright as the sun right now. Finally, something from elementary school that had come into use. Or was it middle school? Either way, this was going to help him look around without anyone suspecting.

I'd like you to put it in this. Dallion placed the ring chord box on the workbench. It just has to have a hole in the lid and on one end. And some decorations.

It won't work, Eury said and stood up.

Why not?

It'll never fit in that box. Besides, everyone will see you're hiding something inside. I'll make you something new. Wait for a bit.

Before Dallion could protest, the gorgon had left, leaving him alone. Come to think of it, the entire conversation had gone much better than Dallion hoped. There was one thing he still wanted to ask her in regard to the overseer, but given the circumstances, he was going to leave it for later.

Smart move, a familiar voice said from nearby.

Instantly, Dallion jumped to his feet, drawing the Nox dagger, but when he turned towards the source of the voice, there was no one there. Only the entrance to the bedroom was visible.

Using an artefact to find the copyette, the voice continued behind Dallion. This time when Dallion turned around, there was a figure dressed entirely in black standing there.

Arthurows, Dallion hissed.

Nasty creatures, the copyettes. But of course, you already know that. Or do you? The charming thing that you saw in the dagger was chained and bound to a realm. The one that escaped, wasn't.

Dallion created five instances of himself, four of which attacked the Star in a variety of different ways. Arthurows split as well, countering each of the attacks with overpowering ease.

Were not in an awakening artefact anymore, he said with an amused expression. Dont worry, Im still bound by the Seven Moons. That doesnt mean I cant lend a helping hand. The enemy of my enemy and that sort of thing.

What do you want, Art?

Are you stuck in a time loop? I just told you.

I heard you, but I know youre lying.

Is that what your superior music skills tell you? And I thought we could put our differences away for a day or so. Especially, since we worked so well last time.

That was before I learned what you were. Dallion made another attempt to attack, this time with six instances of himself, and just as before, he failed to do a thing.

We can do this all day, or we can talk.

Dallion glanced at the door, then back at Arthurows. A tactical retreat seemed like the best option.

Do you stay or do you go? the Star asked with a smirk. Better make up your mind before your Eury arrives. Shell only complicate things. Although, you knew that when you got involved. One gorgon in a city of a million and you picked her for your girlfriend? Theres no accounting for taste.

The provocation was obvious. The star wanted Dallion to get off balance and do something reckless enough to remove the Moons limitations. Dallion could see all that, and still he found it exceedingly difficult not to do so.

Lets talk, he said through gritted teeth.

The copyette is bad news for both of us. Arthurows smile suddenly vanished as his expression became deadly serious. I might have plans for the city, but if the copyette gets going, things wont stop there.

Isnt chaos the thing you enjoy most?

Youve been reading up on me? Yes, I do enjoy chaosthe absolute original. Thats why I hate when someone else tries to copy me. The copyettes were supposed to fail, and they did. If this one manages to succeed things will be less than ideal.

There was clearly something fishy here. Try as he might, Dallion couldnt see the Stars angle. There always was the possibility that he was using Dallion to do his dirty work, or at the very least discover the copyette, but if that were the case, why have this meeting at all?

All your might and you cant find one creature?

Copyettes are different. A glint of hatred flashed in Arthurows eyes. Especially this one. You guessed right that hes an awakened, but not just any awakened. He was a noble, or rather a general whose job it was to do the actual conquering and he was pretty good at it. Seventy-one cities were taken over by him alone during the war, and Im not counting all the assists. Some of those he infiltrated personally. And now, hes discovered a way to break free from the awakening realm. Do you have any idea what he can do with that knowledge?

Yeah, yeah. Free his race.

Not only his race. Youve seen how dryads and nymphs fight. If they are offered a way out of their prisons, whose side do you think theyll join?

Chills went down Dallions spine. The Star was right. Eons ago, the races might have been at war against one another, but alliances could easily shift. As it was said, there were no perpetual allies, there only are perpetual interests. The furies, while individually strong, were scattered, living in the ruins of defeat. The gorgons were few and far between, and Dallion hadnt even seen a living dwarf, or knew anyone who had. That left humanity as the sole greatest power. If the copyette needed an enemy, there could only be one target.

What exactly do you want, Art?

Many things, but for the moment Ill settle for the death of the copyette. He threw a small metallic object at Dallions feet. Looking down, Dallion saw that it was a case of dartbow bolts. Slime bolts, the Star said. The name is self-explanatory. They were used a lot during the copyette wars. Getting them was quite difficult. There isnt a person alive who can make one of those, even the dwarves.

Slowly, Dallion picked them up, all the time not letting go of the Nox dagger. The bolts were flawless in every way, far heavier than he expected, made of an alloy that he couldnt identify. His music and forging skills let him see some similarities with sky silver, but apart from that, it was anyones guess.

How do I use them? Dallion asked.

Stick them deep enough in a copyette and it will go pop. However, be sure that its the copyette you stick them in. If he gets a whiff that someone in the city has these, hell be gone and start this somewhere else.

Isnt that what you wanted? A free playground to play?

Not if that can ruin the long game. Arthurows took a few steps towards the door. Of course, nothing is stopping you from melting these down, or selling them. Im sure the general will buy them for a small fortune. It might even be enough to get him to free that shield you so much like. Im just hoping you do the right thing.

As if youd know Dallion began, but the Star had already vanished.

Quickly, Dallion rushed to the other rooms in the workshop, but there was no trace of Arthurows. Everything was just as it had been before. If it werent for the case of bolts he was holding, all could have dismissed all this away as an illusion.

The offer seemed too good to be true. Even if it was Dallion who would be risking his life, being given a case of copyette killer bolts was suspicious, to say the least. He wasnt the only person with a kaleidervisto in the city. The Star could easily have asked someone else to deal with the problem, someone with a far higher level and a better chance of success. Despite that, he had chosen Dallion. From the history scrolls he had read in the ring library, Dallion had seen plenty of examples of the Star making offers that seemed too good to be true, only to betray the people he made to them later. This wouldnt be any different.

Several minutes later, Eury returned.

Here. She shook a medium-sized metal box. Now you can have a proper spy in the box. Ill need a few hours to get it done.

Thanks. I Dallion stopped, seeing that the gorgon raised a finger in the air.

Considering how much work I have, this is going to cost you, she said. The price Ill be coming with you when you search for the creature. A third of her snakes moved in Dallions direction. Its non negotiable.

Chapter 248: Shadow in the Crowd

Performers Plaza was always quite full, especially after sunset, when it transformed into one of the citys entertainment areas very much to the city guards annoyance. The lord mayor, of course, had ordered that things be kept civil after midnight, which was his way of saying that he wanted the ruckus to be moved indoors.

With the festival approaching, the place was absolutely packed. Musicians, acrobats, and dancers trickled in matching their skills with those present, along with people who came to witness the sight.

When Dallion got to the plaza, he could barely recognize it. There seemed to be almost as many people in the air as there were on the ground. Before his very eyes, new poles were erected to hold lines for performers to sit on.

I take it you dont agree?

Dear boy, when someone comes to you with a solution to all your major problems with no disadvantages, better hold tight to your coin purse. Theres bound to be a price. We just dont know it yet.

Having second thoughts? Euryale asked.

Initially, Dallion thought that having her around would attract attention or make people somewhat nervous. Turned out he was wrong on both counts. At most, someone would give her a glance before continuing on their way or directing their attention to the various performer spots.

Didnt think there would be so many, Dallion admitted.

A lot of people would help Dallion check out some and direct enough attention to himself to make the copyette tip its hand. The problem was that with this many people, he would hardly be noticed by anyone, regardless of what he did. Even so, he still had an ace in his sleeve.

I think Ill go there, Dallion pointed in the highest line crisscrossing the plaza. It had to have been built recently, because there were only a few people standing in various parts of it. Will you be joining?

No, the gorgon replied. Im not in the mood for dancing today.

Okay? Dallion was somewhat surprised that she could dance and hadnt told him. Then again, she did have the skills for it.

Ill find a good spot to keep an eye on you, and several more on the crowd.

Making his way directly under a line, Dallion leapt up, then up again, like a circus acrobat. The entry got some momentary attention, along with mocking whispers of him being an amateur. Ignoring them, Dallion kept his balance on the top line for a few seconds before starting his routine.

The first thing was to take out the kaleidervisto box and hang it round his neck. Euryale had done a great job making the box as exotic as possible and equipping it with a leader trap in accordance with Dallions instructions. Glancing at the ground, Dallion was easily able to stop quite a few echoes within people of the crowd. At a brief glance, one in every fifteen people in the crowd had an echo either in themselves or in an item. In contrast, seven of every ten people on the lines had at least one.

That was goodit meant that if he managed to impress them, word about him would go out faster; and what better way to impress than to play an instrument that was an actual antique.

Slowly, Dallion put on the rings, making it so that as many people as possible could see, then he started playing. The sounds disappeared in the noise and dozens of other melodies in the plaza, but those with improved perception were quick to notice. A few heads started turning his direction. Taking that as a good sign, Dallion increased the tempo. This was the point at which he cursed himself for not investing in more points in reaction. Despite improving in a lot of other areas, playing the instrument proved just as difficult as it had the first time he had tried, and the sporadic practice sessions he had held in his awakening realm hadnt done much to change that. The only saving grace of his level was that it allowed him to use combat splitting in unusual ways, correcting any and all mistakes he made during play.

After five minutes, the people paying attention to Dallion started to grow. The dozen became two, then three. It was the sight of the instrument that caught a persons attention. Once they were looking, the people then paused for a moment, wondering if the ring chord actually let out any sounds. That was how Dallion got them, that and the curiosity he put in the melody.

Soon a number of other musicians started playing along to Dallions melody. Knowing what caught the crowds attention, they were quick to jump on the bandwagon, though none of them added any curiosity of their own. Apparently, they either didnt have music skills, or they were of a far lesser skill than Dallions.

Listening and hearing are two entirely different things, dear boy. You should put some effort into the latter.

It was almost incredible how boring most of the people were. The kaleidervisto removed most of the colors and details, transforming a person into little more than a film negative. Only echoes brought a momentary distraction. As Dallion turned around, though, his box caught a glimpse of something unexpectedan entirely black silhouette among the crowd of pale. Noticing it, Dallion froze for a moment, then quickly turned back to the figure in question.

The person seemed no different from anyone else in the crowdwell dressed, middle-aged, carrying a basket of treats bought from one of the plaza stalls. The similarities ended there. No matter how much Dallion tried, he didnt feel any emotion coming from the person, as if he were in his own bubble of void.

That made Dallion flinch. It was barely noticeable, not affecting his music in the least, but it appeared to be enough for the creature to notice. The persons head turned up, staring at Dallion like a bloodhound. It was at that precise moment that Dallion realized what he was facing, and it realized that Dallion had done so.

Abandoning its disguise, the creature let go of the basket, leaping up the lines with far greater skill than Dallionor anyone else present, for that matterwas capable of. In an instant it was less than ten feet from Dallion. Euryale was nowhere to be seen. Dallion was certain that she had seen what was going on, but didnt have the speed to do anything about it. He himself was at a huge disadvantage without his armadil shield.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Dallion instinctively entered his awakening realm. Here, at least he could think things through without fear of anything happening. Sadly, that wasnt going to change things that took place in the real world.

Nil, what was that?

Thats how a copyette looks though the kaleidervisto?

Dear boy, this isnt an exact science. In fact, it isnt any science at all. Im not even awake of the last time a copyette was discovered in the wild. Not that thats a guarantee of any sort. What we can both agree on is that your attacker definitely wasnt human and youd have a difficult time evading.

Dallion started pacing through the room. Looking at the walls usually filled him with a sense of joy and achievement, though not today. It was easy to call the situation ironic, but in truth, this was exactly what several people warned about. In his mind, Dallion had seen this as a long and complicated game of three-dimensional chessmore scheming and talking than actual fighting. The copyette had put a quick end to that, choosing to end any threat at the first opportunityin this case, three seconds after spotting the threat.

Dallion didnt say a word.

Nil, what happens if I remain in my realm after failing a leveling attempt?

So, Ill have to make it on my first go.

Youre thinking of leveling up? Gutsy, as Spike would put it, but it wont give you a tremendous advantage. Not unless youre hoping of picking up a few achievements along the way. All in all, Id say you have a very long shot of achieving anything.

Not if I improve more than once. Dallion swallowed. In all the scrolls hed read, it was strongly recommended not to do multiple level-ups one after the other. However, as dangerous as they made it out to be, Dallion knew it was possible. He had done the same back when he had visited Dhermas awakening shrine. Looking at it now, the challenges were elementary in comparison, not to mention that Dallion had acquired a weapon that far exceeded his level at the time.

Id make a witty comment, but I know you well enough to tell that youre being serious.

You think its impossible?

Three levels without a proper shield and sword? Id say its highly unlikely. I see what youre going for, just dont forget that there are no do overs on this one.

One mistake and it was all over. Not to mention that Dallion had no idea what the gate challenge would be. What he did know was that unless we went that far, it was hopeless to return to the real world.

Four trials, one life It was the same as playing a game on ironman mode. There was no guarantee of success, but it was the only trick that would keep him from near certain defeat. It was quite a gamble, and one Dallion hadnt come up with entirely on his own. Back when Euryale had made the box for him, she had mentioned that as a last resort he could enter his realm if in danger and possibly improve a level to gain an advantage in the real world. However, even she didnt expect he would go for a gate.

If anyone can give me any practical advice, nows the time, Dallion said.

Dallion waited for a while longer. When no one came up with anything else, he went into the corridor. As expected, a new door had appeared opposite his last leveling up. Gen had apparently changed that room into an inside swimming pool something Dallion wished he had back on Earth.

Lux, Nox, Dallion said. Ill be relying on you. He opened the door.

Chapter 249: General Confrontation

The more the halls of destiny changed, the more they remained the same. The new corridor was much wider than the ones before perfectly square and brightly lit, it resembled a rainless subway rather than a corridor. If it weren't for the torches on the walls, Dallion would have thought that he was back on Earth.

Seen one of these before, Nil? Dallion asked as he made his way forward.

Personally, no. Although I must say its quite an interesting case. Geometrical shapes are less common than one might think. This seems to happen a lot in your realm. Two paradox cubes and now this? One might think youre a mage.

Really? Dallion almost jumped, as a feeling of joy and euphoria filled him.

Strictly speaking he had little idea what magic included apart from a few mentions in the library scrolls, all other information was jealously guarded by the Academy and the Order. Even the Imperial family relied on tutors. Could it be that the mysterious stat was, in fact, magic? That made a lot of sense, and it also

That was rather anticlimactic. Dallion deflated like a balloon.

You should ask my original to give you some scrolls on architecture. Youll find it quite interesting, especially since you have your own realm to arrange.

Maybe later, Dallion hissed beneath his breath.

The corridor ended in a large ornate door of gold and sky silver. Looking closely, Dallion could see motifs of Nerosal engraved on the frame. Someone had gone through a lot of trouble to create this in this case, Dallions own subconsciousness. It made him think of his awakened arena. That was another impressive hall that Dallion had neglected visiting for some time now.

Holding his breath, Dallion took hold of the handle and moved the door open. The massive slab of precious metals slid to the side, revealing an even more illustrious room. It, too, was made entirely of gold, as was all the furniture inside. Four giant statues of milk white marble brought some contrast to the sight: a fury, a gorgon, a nymph, and a dryad. All of them were female, and all were looking at a medium-sized table in the center of the room.

That was rather unexpected. There didn't seem to be any other exits, windows, or openings of any sort. For all intents and purposes, it was as if Dallion was entering a vault.

Hesitation kicked in. In all the adventure books and movies, this was the point at which the unsuspecting adventurer would trigger a trap, nearly killing him, and destroying the entire room. To be on the safe side, Dallion had three instances of him walk throughout the gold chamber, touching as many things as possible. After a while, when no deadly trap was triggered, Dallion himself entered. Of course, there was one instance of him remaining at the door, just in case.

Since the central table was the only thing of interest, Dallion made his way to it. Like the corridor, the door, and the room, the table too was a perfect square or rather, a cube. The sides were so perfect that the edges had the sharpness of a weapons tip.

So glad you could make it, a voice said on the other side of the table. Moments later, a form appeared a very familiar and annoying form.

General, Dallion hissed. Of all people, why did it have to be him? Probably because the Moons knew how much Dallion despised him.

I must say I was rooting for you all the way. The higher your level, the more interesting artefacts you'd be able to clear for me, the general smirked. He was wearing an earth style suit entirely of gold with a ruby necktie. And of course, let's not forget our little arrangement.

No chance of that happening. Dallion crossed his hands.

You know, come to think of it, I was rather generous in our previous arrangement. Considering how you have been treating my property, I believe a few modifications are in order.

Although Dallion knew that this was just an echo created by his realm, his blood was starting to boil. There were so many things in the general that annoyed him: the snobbish attitude, the flaunting of riches, the way he changed deals every time to his advantage. Maybe it was no coincidence that the Star was connected with him. Then again, it was likely that the general had dealings with everyone in the city, from nobles to mirror pool aristocrats.

I think clearing an artefact each month is a reasonable request, the man continued. Wouldn't you say? After all, you almost damaged him during your last adventure.

Didn't you wear on the Seven Moons that you won't change the terms again?

Changing the terms is part of the terms. The general waved his hand dismissively. Besides, I wasn't aware of the capabilities of the guardian when I gave you the shield. Not taking that into account would be unfair. You don't want anyone to take advantage of anyone else, do you?

Interesting, you only bring that when you want something.

Actually, it's quite mundane. You came to me, remember?

That much was true, but there was a point at which enough was enough. Dallion wasn't sure what the trial was exactly, but he got the general gist. So far, he had been taken advantage of too much, even after resolving some of these other flaws.

No. Dallion spat out the word.

You're refusing to fulfil a request I've made? The general arched a brow. Dallion could see amusement throughout his entire head. Haven't you forgotten something? That the shield still belongs to me? If you're not pleased with the deal, I'll gladly take it back. Or rather have it taken back. He snapped with his fingers.

Four furies emerged in the room. All of them were armed and dressed in light armor.

Im aware that youve learned the ability to combat split. The general leaned on the table with both hands. Thats why Ive doubled my usual guards. From what Ive been told, you can make about four instances of yourself. However, you cannot maintain them for long. Lets see how long you manage to keep up.

COMBAT INITIATED

The furies reacted instantly. Within a split second, two of them were on either side of Dallion, performing a simultaneous attack. A set of daggers slashed Dallions left leg, while a stiletto pierced the right side of his rib cage. Several red rectangles appeared, each informing of a serious wound.

Given that a quarter of Dallions life was lost, he chose to switch to another instance the one that had jumped back and drawn a dartbow.

Two bolts flew in the direction of the nearest fury. Alas, they never hit their target. Both bolts changed direction, sliding inches from the person, as if hit by an invisible shield.

Dallion didnt hang around to find out how they were doing it. Letting go of his dartbow, he summed his Nox dagger, while retreating towards a corner.

The furies moved in. Two attacked along both walls of the corner, while the third glided through the air, attacking from above. In a matter of seconds, Dallion found that he was completely cornered. The furies ability to control wind which also meant air was way too overpowered. Even if they werent awakened, which was a big if, they presented more than a challenge. That was, if one didnt take the firebird into account.

Lux appeared and quickly thrust Dallion to the opposing corner of the room, before the trap could fully close. That was one thing about air hot air always had a significant advantage. On the way, Dallion did an arc attack with the Nox dagger. From past experience he assumed that if he defeated the general, all his guards would disappear as well.

The blade never got to hit its target. The final fury moved between Dallion and the general a split second before the attack could take place. The air seemed to thicken, creating a shield of some sort to deflect the blade of the weapon. That didnt seem to work either, as the blade continued unimpeded, slicing through air and into the furies chest. There was a split moment of surprise on the guards face, unable to understand what had happened, moments before disappearing with a loud poof. Sadly, he had done his job the general remained unharmed. By the time Dallion had reached the other corner of the room, the three remaining furies had positioned themselves in front of the general, creating a protective wall.

The crackling, of course, the general said with the same calm he almost seemed to have. It was almost as if he believed no ill could befall him, thanks to his riches and connections. You put him in your dagger, so now you can cut through anything, even air.

Why dont we find out? Dallion snarled.

That is hardly suited for civilized people. Clearly we disagree about something. It would be far more productive to find a mutually beneficial solution to the problem.

You just tried to kill me! Dallion snapped.

And so did you just now. The general shrugged. We can keep blaming each other for what has been or we can work around this. Keep in mind that the city guard will side with me. Despite everything, the shield is mine. I can easily compensate you with a reasonable amount of money and the artifact that you cleared for me. A kaleidervisto, if Im not mistaken. You were looking for one of those, werent you? Well, if you want prefer outside mediation, Ill be happy to oblige.

Dallion felt like killing the general. The man knew that Dallion wanted the shield and was taking advantage of that fact. Under the current circumstances, it seemed that Dallion didnt have any choice.

What if I just kill the rest of your guards? Dallion bluffed.

Youll find that its not as easy as it sounds. But lets assume that you manage that without suffering any serious wounds yourself. Heck, lets assume you manage to kill me as well and are then healed by your firebird. The armadil shield still wont belong to you. The moment youre within reach of a member of the city guard, the shield will scream so loud that every double-digit awakened within airshot will hear. Good luck explaining how you got it then. The only solution would be never to use it, which defeats the purpose, doesnt it?

What do you propose?

Since both of us have faith in the Seven Moons, lets leave it to them. The general gave Dallion a confident smile. A game of skills and chance. Each of us will have a chance to win the shield. If you end up being the victor, the shield is yours, no questions asked. If I happen to win, though, youll have to relinquish it immediately. Either that, or agree to my very reasonable modification to our previous arrangement.

An artifact a month, Dallion snorted.

Merely a trifle, considering your skills. Naturally, the choice is yours. I can still give you a kaleidervisto along with enough pocket money to last you for half a year, at least.

Dallion frowned.

Lets get this over with. Dallion unsummoned his Nox dagger.

Chapter 250: Bidding War

Well be playing an old favorite of mine called Bidding War. The rules of the game are childishly simple, the general said, stressing on childishly.

Dallions fingers itched just to kill him off and be done with it. All that talk about city guard didnt mean a thing in the real world. Granted, doing something as obvious risked ending the trial in failure, and Dallion couldnt risk that.

Well play a total of five rounds. The first one to win three is declared the winner. Are you following me so far?

Gritting his teeth, Dallion nodded. His music skills told him that the general was doing all this to annoy him in order to gain the upper hand. The sad thing was that it was working. No matter how much Dallion tried, the general managed to get under his skin.

Im following, Dallion managed to say.

The first round we bid for bidding position. The general placed a small golden sphere on the table. As long as you have this, you can determine whether you want to be first or second. During the first round, both of us bid at the same time. Now the trick is that we can only bid things that we have.

Wont that be unfair? Dallion crossed his arms. Youve got an entire collection of items.

Yes, it would be, if thats what we were bidding. Since were in a realm, we can only bid our skills and stats. And before you start arguing about values, we can only bid an entire segment up to a gate.

Dallion thought for a moment. The rules sounded confusing, but he was starting to get an idea of what would be going on. As things stood, the person with the greater number of skills didnt have an advantage over someone who had developed their skills to the max.

After our bids are revealed, each of us gets to make additional bids, until both of us drop out.

Both?

Things were starting not to make sense. The whole idea of bidding was to outbid the opponent. If someone quit, that meant the other won by default. Apparently, that wasnt the case for this game.

Thats when the war part of the game begins. The general leaned forward, his smile widening like that of a snake. The person who lost the bidding war goes first and chooses one of his bids to use in combat. Respectively, the opposing party chooses something to counter with. For example, lets say that youve bid your firebird. Since its a pretty strong familiar, you can start the battle with it. I must then choose from my bidding poollets say, ranged combat gate oneand use it to attack, or evade your bid, or firebird in this case.

The confusion increased. It was starting to sound like the game was a mix between bidding and rock paper scissors.

If we end here, Id win. However, you can use something from your bidding pool to counter my counter. Lets say you put your guard skills into play. Then its my turn, and so on, until both sides decide to pass. After that the battle is played out and the winner wins the round, and the initial prize that can be used as a bidding item.

Sounds simple enough, Dallion lied.

But heres the catchone you bid with one item you cannot use it in any other round. That includes all prizes won.

Dallion felt his head spin. It wasnt because the rules were complicatedafter a few moments of logical reasoning, he had grasped those quite well. It was because he had begun searching for a perfect combo to victory.

How do we determine which skill trumps another? Dallion asked.

That the general rubbed his hands is the third element of the game. Through discussion. All it takes for a battle to be won is for the opposing side to concede. Take my example. In an encounter, if I am to fight your firebird with my crossbow, who will win? Ranged weapons can easily do damage to a flying guardian, but they cannot strike flame.

So, you lose.

Not so fast, the general raised a finger in the air. Crossbows were made specifically to fight such creatures, as you well remember. Hitting a firebird would easily pulverize it.

But what if the firebird evades?

But what if the awakened with the crossbow is such a good shot that he hits? The mans smile widened. The crossbow hits an area not a single target, so its more likely that it will hit.

Not true! Lux can change position really fast, as youve seen.

Very good. The general clapped. I concede defeat. You would have won this round.

The victory felt hollow. There were several things that the general could have done, for example, bid his reaction skill and argue that the shooter could react fast enough so as to negate Luxs speed. Instead, he had simply ended the explanation round, in an attempt to give Dallion a false sense of achievement.

Shall we begin?

One last question, Dallion said. What about splitting? Its a skill, but it doesnt have any representation.

You disappoint me. Splitting is linked to mind. As long as you bid mind, you can split. The number of instances is a matter of discussion.

Dallion felt as if he had been punched in the guts. It was one thing to be corrected by Nil, Vend, or Eury. Hearing it from the general was the equivalent of physical damage. Dallion almost expected a rectangle to appear to reflect that.

Alright, lets start.

On cue, a giant rectangle appeared in front of Dallion, displaying all the resources he had to bid with. There was a considerable amount of things: two levels of all his attributes, three of all his skillswith the exception of forging, which remained at the humiliating level 1two familiars, five weapons and one shield. Dallion noticed that the armadil shield wasnt among his things. He glanced up at the general to see whether the item was on that list, when he saw that his opponent had nothing displayed.

Just as things are in real life,

How do I choose without you seeing? Dallion looked the general straight in the eye.

Hmm, that would be tricky, wont it? How about this? A golden box appeared on the table in front of the man. Ive made my choice and put it there. At this point, it doesnt matter what you choose. I promise I wont change things or add new ones.

That sounded fair. Dallions music skills told him that the general wasnt lying.

Or remove, Dallion added. You cant remove anything either.

Nice catch. I promise not to remove or meddle with my selection in any way. And that will go for all rounds in future, both bidding and combat. Happy?

For the moment.

The box was rather small. Instinct told Dallion that there could be one or two bidding items at most. Thats why he knew that wasnt the case. In the realms, everything was metaphor, so size was not a factor. Any container could hold anywhere from one to a thousand, or even more.

Dallions hand moved to one of the representations of his guard skills and tapped it. A minuscule shield of silver promptly appeared on the table in front of him.

Im done, Dallion said, although he did wonder why his bidding tokens were of silver. Possibly that was made to distinguish them from the generals?

The golden box on the generals side disappeared, revealing three items: a glove token, a sword token, and an eye token.

Three? Dallion asked.

What can I say? I like living on the edge. Since I have the advantage, its your turn. Concede the bidding phase or add more.

There was the option that Dallion conceded the entire round altogether. That was, hed only lose one bidding token, while his opponent would waste three. However, that wouldnt help much, since Dallion had no idea of his opponents resources. He could try to outbid him and gain an advantage in the battle phase. However, he had to be careful not to get dragged in.

Attack, acrobatics, and perception, Dallion said, adding some confusion in his voice as he spoke. To his surprise, a harp token appeared on the table in front of him.

I should have mentioned that any skill used while playing the game is considered a skill in the game, the general said, quite amused. Good play, though. Music is almost sure to win any battles.

Instead of an answer, Dallion summoned a dartbow and shot straight at the generals chest. The opponent didnt flinch. The moment the bolt left the dartbow, a dartbow token appeared on the table.

Good to know, Dallion unsummoned the dartbow. What happens at a draw?

We continue as now. I select my first action secretly and put it in the box, then you select yours.

So, ending things here would still put Dallion at a disadvantage. After some consideration, he finally chose to bid perception. An eye token appeared on his side of the table.

Your turn, Dallion said.

Interesting. I think Ill pass. You win the bidding phase, which means I get to choose my first action. He picked up the sword token and placed it in the middle of the table. I choose to attack. Boring, I know, but I have always admired the classic moves.

I guard. Dallion pushed his shield token forward.

Starting slow? I expect thats the way to go for someone whos never played before. The general pushed his eye token forward. I use my perception to find weaknesses in your defence.

I use my perception to defend against your new attacks, Dallion replied in turn, earning a chuckle from his opponent.

I stand my ground.

Since there isnt anything else I could do, I use my athletics to attack you from above.

I use my music skills to make you dizzy. Dallion pushed the harp token forward. Then I attack you with my dartbow.

Bravo. The general started clapping. You win.

Everything on the table disappeared. Once it did, the golden sphere appeared on Dallions bidding rectangle. The remaining tokens hed used didnt.

So, what do you think? A simple and enjoyable game, right?

Despite the generals attempts, Dallion had already seen that it was anything but that. This was far from a game, even a complex one. This was negotiating. All the skills involved knowing the skills and assets of your enemy, putting up a fake front, bluffing, then using everything you had to gain the desired goal. This might have been the first time Dal moved tokens on a table, but he had been playing this game ever since hed met the general and so far, each time hed lost.

How many times can I use the prize? Dallion asked.

Once, of course. Thats why its a prize. By bidding it, you force my hand. I have no choice, but to respond, and you lose nothing of value.

Definitely not as powerful as Dallion initially thought. His gaming mind had tricked him into thinking that hed gain a permanent benefit. As it turned out, he had gained something far less. As in real life, prizes were only useful if a person knew how to properly use them.

The first round goes to you, and the prize to the second round is The general paused. A golden pyramid appeared in the center of the table. The ability to swap. Simply put, you can switch this for any other token on the table. It can be used at absolutely any time, even after you lose. Personally, I tend to retrieve things that I consider valuable.

Dallion narrowed his eyes. The fact that the general was explaining the use of the item meant it served an entirely different purpose. The question was what.

Lets go on.