

Leveling up 251

Chapter 251: Uncertain Reversal

Dallion kept staring at the golden box, as if by doing so he'd glean what's inside. It was obvious that the opponent standing across from him wasn't the general; it was merely an echo created by Dallion's realm, which meant that his skills were no better than Dallion's. And still, there was a deep sense of fear, as if Dallion had brought a knife to a gunfight.

The easiest thing to do was play on the assumption that the general had the same skills at the same level. And yet a voice in the back of Dallion's mind kept on repeating, but what if he didn't? There was more riding on this than just a level. If Dallion failed, he'd have to face a real life opponent, which would be considerably more difficult without a boost.

Nil, can you give any advice on this?

It's been a while since I've played anything of the sort, but even if I were fully familiar with the strategies, I'd respectfully decline. This is your leveling, dear boy, not mine.

You aren't stumped already, are you? The general tilted his head. When in doubt, why not do something extreme? You're in the lead, after all.

Shut up.

There was no point in using his prize now. Leaving it for later, when the general had wasted more tokens, was clearly the proper choice. If Dallion happened to win this round, he'd simply go all in at the next one, and if he lost, then he'd gain control of the later battles.

I won't use my prize, Dallion said, then placed a harp token on the table.

Typical newbie move. The general shrugged. Still, if that's how you want it.

The box vanished, revealing the exact same three tokens the general had played last round: a glove, an eye, and a sword. If Dallion was right that both of them shared the same skills, that meant that the general was out of perception tokens. Maybe this was the perfect moment to test that.

I pass.

Are you sure? The general arched a brow. This is quite a good prize. I forgot to mention that each prize is better than the last.

I figured that out by myself, Dallion lied. Besides, you never said I needed more skills to win a combat. Looking at what you have, music should be enough.

For a single moment, Dallion saw the general's left eyelid twitch. The truth was that Dallion had only said that to annoy the man, but seeing the reaction, it seemed that he had stumbled onto something. Apparently, token quality mattered and in far greater numbers. Could it be that Dallion had been tricked to add more tokens than he had to the previous round? An attack was needed to

win a battle, which by default made all attack tokens much more valuable than the rest. However, music could also be used as a means to achieve victory.

The general placed a second sword token on his side.

Lets start combat, he said in a far less friendly tone. Dallions hunch, it seemed, was correct.

I use my music to convince you not to surrender, Dallion said, pushing his only token to the middle of the table. As he did, one of the generals sword tokens moved forward on its own.

I attack again, the general said, pushing the second token of that type. And claim the prize.

The result was one to one. Now the game really could begin. By Dallions calculations, he already had an advantage. What was more, this round would determine whether his strategy had merit.

The reward for the third round is repetition. A golden cylinder appeared. You can use it to copy any other token you have on the table.

Only tokens I have? Dallion asked. None of yours?

You can copy my tokens as well, the general said reluctantly. Will you use your sphere token?

No, no need. Lets play as we have till now.

This was a round Dallion had to win, not so much because of the overall score, but also because it was the only thing that would grant his opponent an attack option. If Dallion was correct, music tokens would start appearing this round. Dallion had one remaining, which meant his enemy had three.

Arent echoes the same?

Yes, and no. Think of an echo as an autonomous instance of you. They come to their own conclusions and might make a different choice now and again, but they are basically you. If you like apples, your echo will like apples. It might prefer them baked, or maybe have a taste of red apples rather than green, but the source of their desires is the same. Familiars arent like that.

Thanks. Thats all I needed to know.

A smile appeared on Dallions face. If this were a mirror match, there were two things that the echo of the general didnt have.

I bid with Nox, Dallion said. A silver figure of the crackling appeared on the table.

Youre willing to sacrifice your familiar? the general asked.

Its not a sacrifice if he wins. Im just relying on his strength just as I rely on my skills and attributes.

A fair point.

This time, there were only two tokens on the table, both of them harps.

Barely waiting his turn, he then added a fist and a dartbow token to the table. The general added two more shield token, just as fast. It was starting to look as if his plan was to counter everything so he could use his final music skill to snatch a victory. Dallions only solution was to keep the pressure, which he did by using an acrobatics skill and his own music skill. This move made the general pause. Hand on chin, he stared at the table, as if calculating the odds. Dallion did the same, but no matter how he looked, it seemed that the round was won. There was nothing that his opponent could do against the current bid.

Youve become rather aggressive, the general said at last. As if you think that you hold all the cards. A piece of advice a mind token appeared on the table never let overconfidence blind you to the potential possibilities. A second mind token appeared along with another shield.

Both of these were guard moves. They also meant that the general had exhausted all his shield and mind tokens. Of course, he still had the swap token, allowing him to reclaim one of them for the next round. Even so, Dallion could see his trap close.

Harpsisword, dagger, and acrobatics, Dallion said, adding his tokens to the rest.

Now he had the advantage once more. As expected, the general countered with a harpsisword of his own, also adding his final harp token to the mix. After almost a full minute of thinking, a lightning token was also placed.

Using your single reaction? It was Dallions turn to smirk. Things must be pretty bad. He added his stiletto, then his acrobatics token. What about now?

I pass. The general pushed his harp forward. I force you to surrender.

I counter your music with my music, Dallion pushed his own harp to the center.

As do I.

That made two harps against one.

I let my harpsisword deal with that.

A weapon cant be efficient against music.

Thats not what you said last round. Besides, the harpsisword can create music as well.

In that case, I force you to surrender, once more. The final harp joined the rest of the tokens.

And I do Dallion pushed the token of his training stiletto forward. Surrender, my stiletto, that is. Cant say it would have done much damage anyway in its current state.

A typical amateur move, the general said, although there was a note of annoyance in his voice.

Dallion tried to see what other emotions there were, but he found that he was unable to. It seemed that during the course of the game, he lost the ability to perform any skills he used up. That was probably another rule that the general had forgotten to mention. It also meant that Dallion had to be extra careful with his bidding. There was no telling if hed lose all perception if he ran out of tokens, making him an easy target.

I use my shield to stand ready, the general said.

I use my acrobatics to attack from a different spot.

And I use my reaction to turn in that direction.

I use my Nox dagger to break your shield.

I create an instance using mind, to prevent that from happening.

The movements were getting faster and faster. Tokens almost flew to the center of the table, along with the obligatory explanations. Nothing was left to chance, no explanation was wasted.

I use acrobatics again to attack from the side.

And I create another instance.

I use Nox to attack you directly.

And I block with my guard skills.

In that case, I do nothing and just watch Nox slice through your shield and keep attacking! Dallion almost shouted. This was the moment he was waiting for. There was nothing that the general could do now. If he had used his swap prize and reclaimed a music token early on, he would have had the ability to counter the familiar, but now it was too late. Shields and weapons were useless against Nox, and Dallion was very careful to make sure that his opponent used the word block and not evade.

Interesting. The general looked at Dallion, then back at the table. I guess I have to concede this one. There are a few things I could do, but you'll still win in the end. Before we move to the next round, though, I'd like to reclaim an attack. One of the golden swords disappeared, replaced by the golden pyramid.

The fourth round's prize is the ability to erase, the general said as the table cleared once more. That grants the ability to remove any token on the table.

I don't think it'll come to that. Dallion placed the sphere on his side. I want you to bid first.

So, you finally used it? Not a bad choice, but you know it's useless for battle. You should have used it in the second round, instead of music.

I'm using it now. Dallion fought to keep himself from grinning.

I see that, and have no choice but to follow the game's rules. A sword token appeared on the table. I suppose you were expecting that. Not the most elegant approach, I must admit, but it sometimes

takes force to achieve victory. Now what else should I add he scratched his chin. How about three more?

Dallion froze. There were four identical sword tokens on the other side of the table. Not only did that mean that the general's skills were completely different from Dallion's but it also showed that his skill levels were far greater.

I warned you not to celebrate early. The man grinned. All I needed to do was to get rid of your annoying familiar and harpsisword. It would have been better if you bid your flaming chicken last round as well, but then again, one can't expect everything to go according to plan. So, what will you do now? Let me have the eraser prize, or keep on bidding. Who knows? Maybe you'll get lucky? Maybe I'm just bluffing, after all?

Chapter 252: The Final Round

There was no prize offered for the final round. Dallion had quick the last round, just as the general had suggested he do. It was not the initial shock that had caused him to do so. Dallion's gamer mind had already determined that it would come to a showdown, whether that would be the fourth or final round. Under such circumstances, he preferred that his opponent had four attacks less.

All in, Dallion said, placing all stats and skills on the table.

You're betting everything? the general sounded surprised.

Is there a point not to?

This was the final round. Even if Dallion lost his sight, strength, or even the ability to move, it wouldn't matter much if he won. That too was a gamble, but he felt it was a much safer bet than the alternative.

I suppose you're right, the general said. In that case, it's only proper that I do the same.

Two body tokens appeared on the table, along with one mind, one perception, three shield tokens, one shoethe token for athletics and three fury tokens. That made eleven. The general cleverly kept the prize from the last round, which meant he could destroy one of Dallion's tokens at any point. As for Dallion, he had one attack, one reaction, one body, two mind, one perception, a forging token, two guard tokens, an acrobatics token, and Lux.

You didn't say we were allowed to add other people as well, Dallion noted, somewhat annoyed.

They belong to me, the general replied, as if it was the most common thing in the world. There's no reason why you can't as well. You have a, how did you put it, fiancée, if I remember. You can bid her as well. I'm sure she'll have nothing against it.

That was a low blow. While bidding friends was a valid option Dallion had seen many cases on Earth, where relatives and acquaintances were used to gain an advantage in negotiationshe didn't feel comfortable using Euryale as a bidding token.

I know. The complete lack of scruples will lose me Eury, though.

I'm fine, Dallion said through gritted teeth. Who goes first?

Why, you do. A wicked smile appeared on the general's face. I have another token, after all.

So do I.

Thats quite true. If I play my prize token now, Ill erase your familiar. Of course, you can play your doubling prize token and restore the, or you might even use it before I do and create a copy of your familiar. If thats the case I suggest you do so now. Otherwise, make your first move.

So, that was the option Dallion was given: strength versus versatility. If he did what the general suggested, both prize tokens would be out of the way, leading to a much more straightforward game. Dallion would lose his chance of a game reversal, if things got bad, but so would the general. This was a difficult choice.

Do you believe in your strength or do you wish to play it safe? the general taunted him. In the end, it all comes down to that.

Thats what people like you say. The pyramid token appeared on the table. I create another firebird.

And I promptly erase it. A golden box appeared on the table. Since were at an impasse, Ive chosen what Ill do. Its your turn now. Better make it count. Theres no joy in winning in the first round because of a miscalculation.

Dallion pushed a fist token to the center of the table.

An attack with fists alone? The general sounded disappointed. Most likely, he was hoping for something more imaginative on Dallions part. Nonetheless, the golden box disappeared, revealing the figure of a fury. I counter with my fury.

I create an instant of myself and keep attacking. Dallion pushed one of the mind tokens forward.

Which is why I never travel with one fury alone. The general pushed the second fury token forward. But please, continue. Its amusing to see what youll think of once youre out of mind.

Now was the time to start thinking. Furies had great reflexes and also had the ability to control air. Countering them with normal ranged attacks, athletics, or reactions would serve no purpose. Dallion could potentially use a guard token, but that would likely end up a waste, since the general could save his furies for a later attack.

I create another instance. Dallion pushed the second mind forward.

There goes my final fury. It seems Im quite defenseless. Maybe youll choose to attack?

In time. Dallion thought about it. He was suspicious of the general giving him advice, even if it matched his intention. Scratching his nose, Dallion went over the options. It seemed he was at a slight disadvantage: an attack and a body token versus two body tokens and an athletics one. Theoretically, Lux could also be used as an attack token, although that was to be Dallions trump card.

I search for weaknesses. Dallion pushed his perception token forward.

Interesting tactic. Youre trying to tip my hand so you win by doing a counterattack? Well, in that case Ill use my perception to search for weaknesses as well.

I use my forging token to make a dagger, Dallion said.

Do you have the skill for that? The generals smile faded somewhat.

I can summon ingots in the realms, Dallion replied, avoiding the question. We are playing in the realms, right?

Yes. However, you didnt answer my question. Can you forge a dagger?

There was a moment of silence. Both of them were aware that Dallion didnt have that option. However, there was one small detail that the general had overlooked, and that was vital. In fact, there was every chance that it could lead Dallion to victory.

Youre right, I cant, he said. But I can use it to summon an ingot with a sharp point.

Youll have to explain how you do that.

I can change the shape of the mold. It wont be the most aesthetically pleasing weapon, but it will have an edge and a place to drip. And since I can forge all basic metals and alloys, I can easily make it hard enough to deal damage.

And what about the grip? Even if the ingot is as you say, if you cant throw it and you cant hold it, its nothing more than a paperweight.

Oh, it will definitely hurt a bit, but thats not an issue, is it? You never said anything about health being a concern.

Maybe it should be.

Then maybe we shouldnt assume that the furies obeyed your instructions to the letter. Maybe they too were wounded before you called them?

There was a short pause, after which the general started laughing.

How sweet. Youre finally starting to catch on. Pity you had to make so many bad deals in the real world.

Ive been accumulating experience, Dallion replied, even if that wasnt strictly the truth. And after all, we all have to start from somewhere. I take it this trial is exactly thatmy first attempt at negotiation.

Possibly. I accept your explanation on this one, but keep in mind, the more aggressive you become, the greater resistance youll encounter.

The forge icon changed into a rather crude sword.

Naturally, I use a shield to protect myself, the general said.

And I attack again with a normal attack.

Guard. Another shield token to the middle of the table. What now?

I keep on attacking. Dallion pushed his glove token. Using acrobatics I change the direction of my attack to attack past the area which you are guarding against.

Trying to defeat me before I have a chance to attack? The last shield token was pushed forward. It wont work, you know.

What happens in case of a draw? Do we start the game again?

There can be no draw. Well, in the game there could, but its your task to move forward, so an impasse means you lose. Frankly, a draw would be unsatisfying for me as well, but such is life. We have to live with it.

This was another trick that Dallion hadnt been told. That was why the general was so calm. Although a draw would annoy the person or echo in this case the would still fail the trial. Quite nasty when thinking about it. Thats why he had to take a chance.

I attack with Lux, Dallion said, pushing the firebird token to the middle.

Your firebird cannot do damage. Its a healing creature.

It can lift you up and drop you from a great height. Dallion crossed his arms. I know from personal experience.

I suppose I can take your word for it Ill use my mind to create an instance of myself and avoid that.

I use my reaction to redirect Lux to your other instance.

Thats not how reaction works.

But it can be. I can move my mouth fast enough. I just need to be able to react fast enough to your action. And after training splitting for the last few months, I have a pretty good idea what Im talking about. You know that.

There was a long moment of silence. As expected, this was an element that the general had overlooked as well.

You still cant win. I jump safely away, the general pushed his shoe icon. And thats a draw. So sorry you couldnt win this one. The general looked Dallion in the eye, mocking him. A shame, really. You were so close to winning, and yet so far away.

The game hasnt ended yet, Dallion said. We still have two tokens.

Two attacks against two guards. Theres little you could do. If you had my shield, I might disagree, but as things stand he shrugged.

My shield. Dallion corrected. You know, general, I used to find your constant talking annoying. Youd always make a point to display your wealth, education, and social status, not only through objects, but through words as well. The way you talked, the stories, the useless comments youd put in here and there just for the sake of it I get it now.

Do you really? The general crossed his arms.

In fact, I think Ill tell a story of my own. When I first awakened, I had no idea what was going on. Unlike you, I was born in a small village on the empires rim. There it would be an event if a traveling merchant came to town. The only thing wed seen from the outside world were a few trinkets. Even monks from the Order were rare. Needless to say that when I was at my first crossroads, I made a mistake.

Theres a point to this? Or are you just a sore loser?

I was given a choice between attack and guard skills, Dallion continued. For once, he could feel he was getting under the generals skin. Do you know what I chose? I went for the guard.

Congratulations. The general yawned. You proved youd an idiot.

The reason I went for guard was that unlike a sword, you dont need skills to hit someone on the head with a shield. Dallion pushed his shield token forward. Your move.

Time froze. The general stared at the table, as if the world had ended. Dallion half expected for him to come up with the standard explanation that you could guard with a sword just as well, but that never happened. In this world, unlike Earth, things werent as versatile. Anyone had the option to hit someone else with an object, but one needed guard skills to adequately use a weapon for defense. Dallion had seen that in Veils method of fighting first handhis goal was to kill the enemy before the enemy could kill him. It was possible for the general to try and do the same, but that would be futile. A shield could always block a sword, while also hitting the target in the process.

You lose this one, Dallion said.

The moment he did the table, along with everything on it, disappeared. The gold in the room vanished, replaced by stone.

Dallion was just about to add a comment about the armadil shield, when he found that the general had also vanished without warning. In his place, a bright blue rectangle floated above the ground.

You have broken through your barrier.

Your level had increased to 18.

Choose the focus that will serve you best.

Chapter 253: Pure Skill

Theres another room added, Dallion said as he walked back into the corridor.

One down, three to go. While it seemed just a game, Dallion felt quite drained, as if he had done everything the tokens described. This was probably why it wasnt recommended that anyone did multiple leveling levels in one go. Part of Dallion wondered whether he shouldnt take his chances with the copyette in the real world.

Gen stood in the corridor, leaning against a wall when Dallion walked out. The echo had chosen to wear a combination of black and green clothes, keeping Dallion from thinking hes looking in a mirror.

Smart move in there, Gen said. Of course, you could have won much faster.

Next time. What are you going to turn this room into? A casino?

Gen looked at the door, then shook his head.

Nah, Ill leave it empty for when its needed. The way things are going, you might need a dedicated room for each group of skills.

Well, better get ready for two more.

On cue, another door emerged in the corridor less than a few steps away. Clearly, the realm knew when it was to expand and provided the appropriate challenge.

I doubt youll be a match in two levels either. The only difference will be that youll return to the real world exhausted and unable to react in any way. Its just like the game. The strength and effort you put into leveling up, youre not getting back. Leveling one level might be a good idea, but any more youll end up in a worse state than when you were before.

Sleep isnt food, and despite how simple a trial might seem, you need plenty of that afterwards.

There was some logic in what Nil was saying, but Dallion chose to ignore it. He had a plan, and he was sticking to it, despite the difficulties. Everything relied on him getting his perception to twenty, even more than the leveling itself. At that level, hed be able to learn how to see layers and be able to forge sky silver items, and more importantly, see the levels of guard markers that would let him use armor as an effective weapon.

Pushing through the obligatory blue rectangle, Dallion continued down the new corridor. Less than ten feet away, a second door appeared.

The new door was completely made of iron and in near flawless condition. The only weak spots were the hinges and the handle.

Carefully, Dallion took the handle and opened the door. The large slab of iron slit open like the vault of a safe, allowing Dallion to enter. So far, everything looked familiar. Seeing the person expecting him inside, though, it was taken aback.

Falkner? Dallion blinked. What are you supposed to be?

Sorry, Dal. The echo of Falkner replied.

Sorry?

Sorry that Im your trial. I know you need to get past me, but youre not ready.

Dallion looked at the room. It was rather large, though completely empty. There was a complete lack of furniture or decorations, nothing but a large iron door behind Falkner.

Youre my trial? Dallion stepped forward, already considering how to proceed. He knew that Falkner was a noble and had been trained far better than Dallion could hope for. Even so, his level remained lower.

Im part of it.

We dont need to fight, Dallion added a few notes of surrender in his words. He could see that Falkner didnt want to fight. Hopefully, a slight nudge through his music skills would end this part of the trial.

Always the same Dal. The boy smiled. Youre using music to get me to surrender without fighting. But youre not doing so for your sake alone. You really prefer that your opponents surrender to you.

That might sometimes work on guardians, but people are a different matter. Most of the time they don't want you to succeed and are prepared to do whatever it takes to stop you. Even cheat.

That doesn't sound like something you would do.

You're right. I won't. Falkner summoned a pair of swords. I don't have to.

Dallion split into three instances and just in time. Without warning, Falkner dashed forward, then leapt in the air, ten feet before reaching Dallion. At that point, he too split into three instances, each attacking its own target.

Shield, Dallion shouted in all three instances, forgetting that the piece of equipment remained back in the Gremlins Timepiece. The victory from the previous trial was still fresh in his mind, creating the impression that he had won the shield. Sadly, that was nowhere near the case. The only shield Dallion had now was the standard buckler he had chosen at level one.

The instances of Falkner performed two identical thrusts and an arc attack, aiming to slash Dallion's thought. In two of the cases, the weapons hit their target. In the third, though, Dallion managed to combine his acrobatics and guard skills to evade both blades safely.

Lux! Dallion shouted, summoning his Nox Dagger.

Falkner didn't pause his attack, continuing with three new instances. The fact that Dallion could now fly didn't bother him in the least. When Dallion flew across the room, Falkner merely continued forward, then used his acrobatic and athletic skills to jump off the wall and perform another attack.

Metal hit metal as the Nox dagger made a crack in one of the blades. Unfortunately, for Dallion, the other one hit.

CRITICAL WOUND!

Your health has been decreased by 50%

A red rectangle appeared. Ignoring it, Dallion made another attack, aiming for the blade's weak spot. The attack proved successful, slicing the weapon in two.

Lux, keep me away from him!

The firebird obeyed, shifting Dallion's position with a poof, moments before Falkner's next attack split the air.

What the heck?!

The intensity of the battle was unlike anything Dallion had experienced so far. There was no hidden meaning, no puzzle he had to solve, just pure combat skills and reflexes, and so far, it seemed that Dallion was lacking.

Was this what it was like fighting a noble? Even if Falkner hadn't reached the level required, he had polished his current skills to the point that it practically made no difference. It took Dallion two familiars just to keep up.

You passed the second gate, Dallion said, relying on his music skills to gain even a small advantage. When did that happen?

A few days ago, Falkner replied. There was no telling whether the real Falkner had done so, not that it mattered much in this instance. Ive almost caught up to you. The difference is that I know how to use my skills, and you dont.

Is that the trial? Dallion asked as Lux poofed him to another corner of the room to avoid another attack. Im supposed to maximize my skill efficiency?

A series of bolts split the air, heading towards Dallin. Creating two instances of himself, Dallion deflected the bolts with his buckler, all the time keeping one eye on Falkner. The little monster had turned out much more dangerous than he had imagined.

The trial is merely the means to show you whether you have what it takes to continue on. And you dont. Falkner stopped attacking and calmly started walking in Dallions direction. You havent even figured out what flaw you need to resolve. I had hoped that seeing me would give you a hint, but apparently not. The blade he was holding disappeared, replaced by a chain.

Lux, get me close!

With a popping sound, Dallion appeared right above Falkner. The position was perfect. Summoning his dartbow, he fired a bolt at the boy while striking at him with the Nox dagger. Both attacks hit their target, causing Falkner to disappear in a puff of silver particles. However, that wasnt the only thing that happened.

CRITICAL WOUND!

Your health has been decreased by 50%

A second red rectangle appeared above Dallion.

You have failed to defeat your fears.

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

The blue box glowed brightly in front of Dallions face, but he couldnt see it. His mind was elsewhere, trying to come to terms with what just happened. It had been clear that completing three levels would be a next to impossible task, but Dallion had honestly believed he could manage. This wouldnt be the first time he fought enemies significantly stronger than him.

After his victory against the general, Dallions confidence had received a massive boostthe expected the following trials would be easier, if only marginally. Instead, he had been utterly defeated in the very next fight that had taken place. Worse, with this loss, he had pretty much sealed his fate in the real world as well.

Dallion? Nil snapped his fingers next to Dallions left ear. Are you still with us?

Dallion glanced sideways, still unable to utter a word.

Ah, good, youre with us, Adzorgs echo replied, very much relieved. For a moment I thought something serious had happened.

More serious than this? Dallion asked in a dark tone.

You could have suffered some permanent effects, for one thing. It remained unclear whether the echo was being objective or he was just trying to make Dallion feel better. The important thing is that you managed to level up and got a taste of what level nineteen would require. The best solution would be for you

There is no solution, Nil. I was relying on these three levels. Dallion felt like crying. Worse, he felt real existential dread seep into his very being. What would happen to him now?

Yes, your failure is quite unfortunate, but its not the end of the world. Nil paused for a few moments. Although with that attitude, it might as well be. Tell you what, why dont you get some sleep?

Dallion stared at him, as if the echo had spinach stuck in his teeth.

Its not as good as real world sleep, but it helps put things in perspective. And before you come up with some gloom and doom argument, what do you have to lose? Time remains still in the real world, so you might as well take that nap.

The logic was so absurd that Dallion couldnt think of anything to counter it with. Awake or asleep, nothing was going to change. What was more, Dallion could spend decades in his awakening realm before returning to reality.

Come along. Nil grabbed him by the hand and pulled him through the room.

Seeing the state of their owner, Lux and Nox eagerly followed. It all seemed exceedingly strange, almost surreal, as if Dallion was in a dream that had gone bad. Without a word, he allowed himself to be dragged to the realms forge, where a crude bed was waiting for him, next to the forge fire.

Here we go, the echo said. I know its not much, but thats all I could manage with the present limitations. If you want something better, youll have to make it yourself.

Sure, Dallion sat down on the side of the bed. It felt uncomfortable, almost as rough as his bed in his old home back in Dherma village.

Everything will be alright. The old man smiled. You just need a little nap. Youll see.

Uh-huh.

Yes, thats right. The echo nodded. Forget about the last fight and focus on what youre supposed to do. Everything else will come later. He tapped Dallion on the forehead.

Everything turned black.

Chapter 254: Felygn's Boon

And promise youll call every day, Dallions mother said. And if you cant text.

I promise, Dallion smiled.

Leaving for college felt more awkward than he imagined. It was bad enough that he felt anxious about the upcoming changes. His mother made things far more complicated, almost crying. His father had turned out the smartest of the lot, avoiding the entire goodbye scene under the pretext that he had to check the car.

I'll be in touch, he said, avoiding looking her in the eyes. I promise.

And if there are any problems with your room, your father and I will

It'll be alright, mom. I checked out the campus online and the reviews are fine. Dallion lied. In truth, he had mostly checked pubs, shops, fast-food joints and everything else reachable from campus. Don't worry so much.

An obligatory hug followed, after which Dallion went to his father's car for the long drive to the airport. Technically, there was no reason for it; he could easily have Ubered to the airport but he thought that a drive with his father was the least he could do.

The drive was silent for the most part. After providing some basic advice, Dallion's father remained quiet, turning on a collection of music songs. On his end, Dallion didn't have much to say either, although he would have preferred a different selection of music. It was only after they had arrived and Dallion was grabbing his bags, when some more advice was offered.

Don't do anything too reckless. Dallion's father handed him the last backpack. And careful with the drunks and other things.

I'll try to remember. Dallion smirked.

It costs a lot to go where you're going, so don't mess up. Remember, there are things that can be fixed and others that can't be.

I know. Even now, Dallion felt he was being treated as a child. For the last two years, he had pretty much been on his own: he had his own priorities, friends, a part-time job the only time he was home was to sleep. For his parents though, he appeared to be the same little child that needed help putting on a shirt.

Be nice, but don't trust too many people. And don't expect too much. That way you won't be disappointed.

Right. That was a dark way of viewing the world. Then again, his father was a lawyer.

Now, I don't expect you to call every night, but every now and again it is expected. Also, it's better than your mother calling you.

No questions there. Dallion nodded.

Good. If there's anything you need from me, I prefer texts or mails.

Anything with a paper trail. Dallion took his backpack. Thanks dad. I'll be fine.

I know. Take care, son.

This was the first time in quite a while that Dallion's father had addressed him in such fashion. However, the moment was barely noticed. Other priorities had taken hold, namely getting to the gate on time, then making his way to campus.

With school season approaching, even small airports were packed with more people than they could handle. Nothing was as fun as standing in line, waiting to get the baggage checked.

Where's the fast lane? a loud female voice asked above all the chatter. Dallion, along with most of the people in the queue, turned around to see what was going on. Or VIP treatment?

The person in question was roughly Dallion's age. Platinum blond and dressed in the latest designer clothes, she screamed trust fund kid. Dallion had no idea who her father was, but it was clear he had impressive amounts of money and clout, judging by the way she behaved. Still, Dallion had the strange feeling that he knew the girl from somewhere.

Come along, a platinum blond young man probably her brother said as he moved to the nearest airport information assistant. I've got a first-class fast pass. He took out a piece of paper from his pocket and showed it. Which way?

The clerk was utterly confused. Knowing that the pair wouldn't take no for an answer, she looked at the printout, then at the blonds.

And you're going to? she asked delicately with the politest smile she could muster.

Nerosal university, the girl said with a twist of her head as she stepped next to her brother. We were just admitted there.

It took less than a minute to get the pair sorted. Dallion, along with a lot of others, enviously watched from the queue as the blonds were escorted to a special entrance that bypassed the standing baggage check-in and security checks, probably to the first-class lounge. In Dallion's case, it took considerably longer. Close to an hour later, he, too, was at the gate, scrolling through his phone as the airplane was fueled and loaded.

It's going to be a calm flight, someone said. Dallion looked up to see a middle-aged gentleman dressed in a light green suit. It seemed quite expensive, even if it wasn't a brand Dallion recognised. It was much more high class than any of his father's suits, that was for sure.

Seems so. Dallion glanced at his phone to check the weather forecast. Looks like clear skies all the way.

Indeed. The man smiled. And a full moon.

The comment made Dallion forget his browsing and pay more attention to the man. He was clearly too well dressed for coach. A few decades ago, Dallion would have imagined him being the head of a bank or similar institution. At present, he seemed like someone's butler not that Dallion had ever seen one.

Heading to university? the man asked.

Why yes. How did you know?

Your shirt, the man pointed.

Dallion looked down and saw the Nerosal U emblem all over his T-shirt. That was strange, he didnt remember putting this shirt on.

Learning is the greatest reward, the man in green said. Some say its the greatest treasure. Like everything else, though, the important thing is to keep a steady pace. Burning out helps no one.

You can say that again. You in academia?

You could say that. The man looked at his wristwatch. Normally, I dont get involved, but every now and again they call me to explain a thing or two. For a split second, his eyes glowed green.

Normally, this was the moment when a person would jump back or even scream in astonishment as something supernatural was taking place. Dallion, however, only looked on as if it were nothing much. What was more, he still couldnt kick the feeling that all this seemed terribly familiar.

In this case Im here to help you, Dallion, the man said.

I dont understand

Suddenly, a distant memory appeared in Dallions mind. It was more a realization than a memory. Slowly, he looked around, only to see that the entire room around him was empty. The passengers, the cleaning staff, even airport security, had vanished.

Im in a dream, Dallion said, turning back to the man. His appearance had changed as well. No longer middle-aged, he now looked like someone in his late twenties, bronze skinned and dressed in a loose green travelers outfit.

A dream within a trial within a realm. The other nodded.

Youre the hidden moon.

No. Im just one of the moons that chose to take a step back. Seeing you, I decided to intervene.

Because of the trial?

Because I think you deserve a chance.

The Moon turned to his left. As he did, Dallion noticed that the walls that surrounded them were gone, revealing a field with a view of the night sky. There was a single full moon there, and it was green.

Its no secret that you failed your trial, the Moon continued. Youll have to find the reason on your own, but suffice it to say that you werent ready for that challenge.

And youll tell me what I need to do to overcome it? Dallion said in hope.

No. A failed challenge is a failed challenge. In a day, youll have to try again and continue doing so until you break through your current limitations. Im here for something else. Ive noticed that you have a tendency to prefer draws or surrenders to defeating your enemies.

Dallion had no idea whether that would be considered good or bad, so he nodded.

Thats precisely why Ill offer you a boon. If you agree, youll jump two levels and potentially pass the gate you so much want to. Note, that Im not saying that youll pass, or that itll help you against your real-world battle even if you do. The only thing Im offering is a chance.

Two levels just like that? Suspicion crept into Dallions mind.

In exchange Id make a request. The Moon smiled. Its not the first time youve had such an offer. The well guardian in your village did something similar. He surrendered, allowing you to achieve victory while only asking one thing in return. In my case, the request will be a lot more difficult.

Clearly, there were strings attached, but even so, the deal sounded too good to be true. Of all the things that could have happened, having a moon intervene was unusual, to say the least.

Im not a Star, if thats your concern. Although if I were, Id probably say the exact same thing. Youre free to refuse and return to your rather uneventful dream. The Moon turned around. An airport? Given the wonders youve seen and can imagine, you could do so much better.

If Nil were here, the first thing Dallion would do was ask him for advice. Alas, even echoes had no place in a dream even if Gloria and Veil had somehow managed to find their way here.

Do I get to hear the request before I decide? Dallion asked.

Of course. Provided you survive your upcoming fight, Id like you to find a dragonlet in the wild and bring it to me.

Dragonlet? Dallion blinked.

You just need to take it to an awakening shrine. Ill handle things from there.

I dont even know what that is But Ill have to find out, he said to himself. Whats the time limit?

Theres no time limit, just as there wasnt to the promise you made the well. However, if your commitment falters, Ill know.

And what happens then?

Vines in the form of green chains emerged from the ground and wrapped themselves round Dallion before he could say a word. He could feel the thorns pierce his skin through his clothes.

If your commitment falters, youll lose all you have gained, The Moon said, as one of the vines pierced Dallions chest. The pain was momentary, like a sharp prick in the heart. Remember, I have your heart in my grasp now, and Ill know what your intentions are, just as Ill be able to punish you.

The rest of the chain-vines loosened, letting Dallion drop to the ground. Now he had witnessed first hand exactly what the Moons representedinspiring, powerful, and extremely terrifying. No wonder no one dared break their rulesthe Moons themselves didnt allow it, and punishment was swift.

Dont let that worry you, though. I have faith in you.

You have received a boon from Felygn.

You have broken through your 2 barriers

Your current level has increased to 20.

Choose 2 focuses that will serve you best.

With that, I suppose its time for you to pass through the gate, the Moon said. I can give you the grand tour, but I think both of us would prefer the experience be short and sweet instead.

A stone altar emerged from the ground.

Your thoughts? the deity asked in the fashion that suggested that anything other than agreement would cause issues.

Yes. Dallion cautiously stood up. Short is good.

A large circular window emerged above the altar. As much as Dallion tried to look through it, but all that he could see were clouds.

One simple question, one simple choice, Felygn said. Do you want to remain where you are, or continue on, regardless of the changes you'll go through.

Chapter 255: Seer

What changes? Dallion asked the Moon.

The first gate trial was linked to the ability to create and handle the creation of an echo. The second to link, and potentially invade, awakened realms. Each trial had unlocked capabilities relating to awakening, and each next set of abilities had a greater impact than the last.

Does it matter? The deity seemed amused.

In order to make a choice, I need to know what options I have, Dallion replied. Otherwise it isn't a choice.

Someones been studying theory, or browsing a lot online. Sometimes it's possible to have a choice without being presented with the options. It's up to you to find out what you know or, if you prefer, roll the dice and hope for the best.

There was a brief moment of silence.

Fortunately for you, you aren't at that stage yet. The choice is your sight.

I have to become blind? Dallion felt a shiver pass through him. That was a price he wasn't sure he wanted to pay.

Quite the opposite. You'll be cursed with the ability to see, really see. The Moon walked next to Dallion, gazing in the mirror. All the cracks the real world has, the creatures that hide in the wild, the holes through which they come and go. If you accept, that is what you will see every day of your life. Only taking out your eyes would stop it.

That sounded harsh, but it was meant to be. Dallion's imagination took over, causing him to picture a world full of monstrosities hiding among everyday things. He had seen it in plenty of horror movies back on Earth. Could it be this terrible, though? Come to think of it, a lot of the higher level awakened had their flaws that they should have gotten rid of years ago: Spikes fights, Eurys flirting, Adzorgs gambling. Was it possible that all those were a sort of coping mechanism to deal with this sight?

So, if I say yes, everything changes? Dallion asked.

If you say yes, you stick your head through the mirror. If you're able to handle it, then yes. If you fail, forget this conversation ever happened. And don't tell the lower levels about it.

That was the same as most other things regarding awakening: never tell someone until they were ready to learn it. Considering the changes awakened went through, it didn't seem like such a bad idea anymore.

To see or to flee. Dallion considered his options for a moment. It didnt help that he had also increased his perception to twenty, along with the two levels he had been granted. That would only make him see more of whatever terrors there were in the world. Even so, he was determined to keep on going.

I accept, he said, adding a few notes of self-confidence as he spoke. The effects were negligible.

In that case, go ahead. The Moon stepped back.

The clouds in the window moved about. Grabbing the frame with both hands, Dallion took a deep break, then quickly stuck his head in, as if he were diving into a pool of water.

There was no sensation as his head went through the frame. Wincing out of habit, Dallion expected to feel his press against a solid surface. Instead, he felt as if hed stuck his head out of a car window at full speed. Strong winds smacked his face, trying to blow his hair off as if it were a toupee.

After a few moments of waiting, Dallion finally opened his eyes. Nothing happened. The clouds had disappeared, revealing a view of the wilderness, the same that he had gone on his way to Nerosal. Slowly, though, differences began to emerge. Small cracks had emerged on the ground, but they also werent cracks. They were creatures, hiding within the minuscule tears of various realms. Too strong to be kept in, yet too weak to leave, they remained there, looking, waiting for something to change so they could emerge. The interesting thing was that not all of them were as frightening as Dallion had thought. In fact, there wasnt a single chainling or Star spawn he could see. The creatures were unusual, sometimes twisted, but at times rather pretty in an outlandish sort of way.

You see them, dont you? the Moon asked. From now on, they will see you as well. Thats the second part of the price.

Will they attack me? Dallion felt compelled to step through the window and get a closer look, but the Moon grabbed him by the shoulder, preventing him from doing so.

They might if you poke too much. Youre no longer under our protection. From here on, youre on your own. Keep that in mind and dont forget your promise.

The next thing Dallion knew, he was in the library, lying on several chairs next to one another. Several figures were in the room, mainly Nil and Gen, but also Harp, to his surprise.

You return, dear boy, the old echo said, helping Dallion sit up. We were worried there for a moment. Havent seen anyone sleep so much in quite a while.

Huh? Dallion managed to say. His back and neck were quite stiff.

Apologies about that. It seems you havent made a bed, so we had to improvise. None of us could create in your realm, you see. We could move things around, but for anything significant, youre the landlord, so to speak.

Dallion stood up. His back and neck cracked as he stretched, reminding him of all the times he fell asleep during parties or in front of his computer after an all-nighter playing games. As far as discomfort went, this wasn't too bad.

Feeling better I hope?

Very, Dallion replied, still uncertain of what the nymph was doing there. Is everything alright? I'm not used to seeing all of you here.

Before anyone could reply, a black silhouette dashed through the library, clawed its way up Dallion's clothes, as it climbed to his shoulder.

Nox, Dallion sighed. Some things never changed.

It was only later that Lux also emerged. Knowing that his older brother had taken claim of Dallion, the firebird fluttered around, also displaying his concern.

Seriously, what did I miss? Dallion asked, petting the crackling on his shoulder.

It's not what you missed. It's what we missed, Gen said. You passed your third gate despite failing the trial. How did that happen exactly?

The question surprised Dallion. Normally, there wasn't supposed to be any secrets between him and his echo. The fact that there were meant that the Moon wanted it to be this way, and if that were the case, it was better that Dallion didn't share his particular experience.

You tell me. Dallion glanced at Nil. I wasn't the one who got bonked on the head. What exactly did you do to me?

Nothing, really. The old echo shrugged. I just thought that you needed some rest, so I used a well, nothing that you'd be interested in. If you are, however, I would gladly provide the name of the tome in question for you to read up.

Harp? Dallion looked at her, ignoring Nil's offer. Why are you here?

All eyes turned towards the harpsword guardian. Even Nox glanced in her direction. Dallion could tell she didn't wish to be here, almost as if she were afraid, and yet there was a strong sense of duty shining within her, visible thanks to his music skills.

Don't let him touch your face, a series of melodious sounds combined, forming a phrase. Protect your face. And your head.

Dallion tilted his head, confused.

I believe, dear boy, that the guardian is referring to your battle in the real world. The same you went on this reckless endeavor. Three levels in one go. Honestly. He shook his head.

Despite Nil's attempts, Dallion could tell that this wasn't the real reason. Something else had made the nymph go to this part of his realm, something she was not willing to discuss. Possibly at a later point he was having a talk with her about it.

Protect the face and the head, he said. Got it. Dallion did a bit more stretching. See you once this is over.

Concentrating for several seconds, he left the realm, returning to the real world. Unused to keeping its balance, his body needed a fraction of a second to readjust. That moment proved to be enough, and thankfully, so was his improvement in perception.

At level twenty, Dallion was able to see far more than he could in the past. The movements of his attacker no longer seemed as fast as before. Every muscle, every part of his clothing had a movement of their own, all visible and predictable. In Dallions mind, he could see his opponent reaching out for his eyes.

Without wasting time, Dallion split into three instances. The split only lasted a second, but it was enough for him to choose an instance in which he evaded the attack, stepping off from the rope he was standing on so he could land on one of the lower ones.

If this were a realm, Dallion would have immediately gone on the counteroffensive. He had matured enough to know not to exhibit such recklessness; furthermore, he was able to see that his skills were still far inferior to those of his enemy. There was only one thing he could do now, and it was to get out of the way as soon as possible and let those more capable than him deal with the situationnamely Eury.

Block the plaza, Dallion heard a whisper. The fashion in which it was said suggested it to be an order; the faint echoes accompanying itthat it had occurred a considerable distance away. What was unmistakable was that the voice belonged to the citys overseer.

I knew youd be using me as bait, Dallion said, pleased with himself.

From the corner of his eyes, he could see city guards dashing to the scene from several directions. So far, the encounter hadnt caused the crowd to panic, but he suspected that to be a matter of time. Dallions attacker probably knew it as well, for he jumped off the rope as well, eager to follow him.

Three daggers split the air, flying straight at the enemy. Each of them was perfectly aimed, yet none managed to hit their target. With a screwdriver twist, the foe managed to evade all of them as if it were childs play.

This way! Eury shouted a short distance away. She, too, was rushing towards the action, shoving her way through the crowd. The number of people on the lower levels of ropes made it impossible for the gorgon to join the fight above, so she had to rely on the only alternativebring the fight down to her.

Having Jiroh, or any fury there to lend a hand, would have been extremely helpful. Unfortunately, that wasnt to be.

Coming within a few feet of Dallion, the enemy made another attempt to grab his head. Somehow, the creature managed to move much faster through the air. Seeing that he couldnt avoid the attack, Dallion wielded the box with the kaleidervisto as a weapon, hitting his enemy in the arm. There was a loud crack. Dallions first reaction was to think that the artefact had shattered. Instead, it turned out that the attackers arm had, and that was not all. Instead of blood, black slimy liquid had started oozing from him, the same that he had seen a while back.

Chapter 256: The Overseer's Strength

Despite everyone having heard the word, general knowledge about chainlings remained almost non-existent. Everyone had heard the name of the monster, those who travelled in the wilderness, even were aware of how vicious they were. Other than that, though, the creature's true nature remained a secret known only to the Order of the Seven Moons, and possibly the Imperial family.

As Dallion stood in the plaza, waves of fear passing through him, barely anyone in the crowd reacted. Dallion's music skills, heightened by his new perception levels, let him know exactly what emotions their emotions were: interest, slight excitement mixed with concern, a fear of pick-pocketing. For them this was nothing more than a normal fight, a thief trying to take advantage during the time of the festival facing who was cornered by the city guard. The domain controlled by the lord mayor had surrounded them with such a sense of security that they couldn't even imagine a creature of this nature walking around. Dallion could, though.

The more he evaded the human chainling, the more aggressive the creature became. The alarming thing was that it continued to be focused on him. Neither Euryale, nor the three members of the city guard who had arrived at the scene were able to change that. While engaging with them, the chainling kept heading towards Dallion.

A circle formed in the crowd as people moved back from a safe distance away. Then, suddenly, three quarters of the people simultaneously fainted, falling to the ground. Only awakened remained, though even they felt the effect of an invisible force pressing against them.

The chainling felt it as well, for it stopped its attacks, looking around like a cornered animal. Fight or flight instincts had kicked in. This would have been the perfect opportunity for Eury and the city guards to take it down, but none of them did anything of the sort. Instead, they quickly dashed back.

Quick! Eury said, grabbing Dallion's hand.

Dallion had no choice but to trust her, using his acrobatic skills to leap to the edge of the plaza. Moments later, more people started fainting, this time awakened. Musicians, acrobats, and performers dropped in groups, crashing to the ground with a thump. Their improved bodies were likely going to protect them from any lasting harm, although some visits to a city healer were likely. Within moments, only the chainling remained.

What's happening? Dallion asked.

She's here, Eury whispered back.

A second later, no further questions were necessary. A new figure had emerged on the scene, the same one that had called Dallion for a talk not too long ago.

Dallion had no answer. What he knew was that he was experiencing a new wave of fear, stronger than that coming from the chainling. Even at such a distance, it took all his effort to remain standing.

Out in the daylight, the Overseer seemed far different from she had before. The veil that had covered her face was gone, revealing a woman in her mid-twenties with pitch black hair. Slowly, she made her way to the center of the plaza, where the chainling stood. As far as anyone could tell, the woman wasnt carrying a single weapon; she didnt need to. If anything, at present she was the most terrifying creature at the plaza, more terrifying than anything Dallion had seen, with the possible exception of the chainling he had helped hunt in the wilderness.

Dont look, Eury whispered. Half of her snakes were curled away from the plaza. Dallion could tell that she, too, felt discomfort, if not outright fear. Even so, he couldnt keep himself from staring on.

You really should take her advice, dear boy. Youll have one heck of a headache once this is over.

Why? Whats going to happen?

At the pace the Overseer was moving, one would have expected it would take half a minute at least for her to reach the chainling. In truth, it took less than an instant. One moment she was over a hundred feet away, and the next she was in immediate vicinity, thrusting her hand through the chainlings chest.

The chainling wasnt going to let itself be killed without a struggle. Black ooze covered the clothes of its human host, transforming them into thick scales. A tail with razorblade spikes emerged, slashing towards the Overseer.

Look out! Dallion instinctively shouted, but it was already too late. Before he could finish speaking, the tail had hit the womans shoulder, sinking in.

Dallions initial thoughts were to help the Overseer. It was only a few instants later that he noticed the obvious: despite the strength of the attack, the woman hadnt moved by a single inch. It was at that point that the reason for his unexplained fear became apparent.

The Overseers a chainling? Dallion uttered.

I told you not to look, Eury said. Not all monsters are in the wilderness.

Dallion felt tears roll down from both corners of his eyes as he stared on. His improved perception helped him see both chaining figures as if he were standing a few feet away. But there was more, he could see the invisible cracks that emerged from them. To the standard onlooker, the battle was merely an exchange of blows with the blood and gore that came with it. Dallion, though, could see

thousands of minuscule tendrils spreading from each person in an attempt to devour the other. Like roots of void, they dug in, devouring anything they came in contact with. It was a dark and grotesque process and the Overseer was winning. The tendrils from her arm were spreading through the chainlings body twice as fast as its own were advancing through her shoulder. A smile emerged on the womans face. For a single moment, she turned her head and looked in Dallions direction, as if pleased he was witnessing her power.

A distinct squishing sound echoes throughout the plaza. Instead of a splat, however, the chainling simply disappeared, entirely consumed by the woman. Nothing but a few clothing fragments remained.

Its over, the Overseer said in a calm, clear voice. You can join me.

After a momentary hesitation, several city guards made their way through the sea of collapsed people to the spot where the Overseer stood.

You too, Eury, the Overseer added. And bring Dal with you.

The gorgon hissed. She didnt like being bossed around, but the more powerful emotion Dallion could feel from her was a deep protectiveness of him. A cluster of snakes turned in his direction.

Just dont step on too many people, the gorgon said, then without explanation, went forward, leaving Dallion behind.

Nothing special about the clothes, a city guard said, as he picked them up from the ground. He had a lieutenants insignia. Locally made. Could have been bought anywhere.

Youll have to do better than that, the Overseer said.

Is that whats been killing awakened? Dallion asked.

There was a noticeable moment of silence.

Unlikely, the woman replied, to everyones relief. At least not all of them. Although, given this abomination kept hidden for so long, its not out of the question.

Blocker ring, another guard said, lifting it in the air. Looks pretty standard. Ill have the forgers give it a look.

Any thoughts on the matter, Eury? The Overseer turned to the gorgon.

Nothing Ive heard. Although I doubt its from an artifact. Its too clean to have happened by accident. I fear you might have a cell.

Star cultists

I guess I have you to thank, Dal. Despite her words, the Overseer didnt seem overly happy. At moments like these, Dallion really wanted to be able to see her emotions. If you werent obsessed with your copyette hunting folly, we wouldnt have found this.

I suggest you take a short break, say a few days, before continuing.

You want me to keep searching for the copyette? Dallion was unsure if he had heard correctly.

If theres one abomination, its likely there are more. Clearly, they have kept themselves hidden from me and the mirror pool. Thanks to your contraption she glanced at the kaleidervisto box Dallion was holding. The device had suffered a bit of damage after being used as a weapon we have a way to get them to reveal themselves. Find as many as you can, she said to one of the city guards. Ill have a word with the lord Mayor to have the city borrow them, until the end of the festival, at least.

Dallion bit his tongue. Even after all this, they were still going to use him as bait.

What did you expect, dear boy? Its you that has drawn attention to yourself.

I didnt expect itll come to this.

People rarely do. Thats why I kept telling you to think things through. Oh, and in case you start having any ideas. No, you wont get any benefits of special treatment. Well, other than being on their good side.

So, its just like a different version of the mirror pool?

Thats one way of putting it. I wouldnt say that out loud, though. Nobles can be a bit touchy on that topic.

Anything else, you want to ask? The Overseer was clearly being sarcastica reminder that she was the one asking the questions. Dallion, however, decided to take advantage.

Is there any connection between this and the copyette business?

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at Dallion, expecting the Overseers reaction. Half of Eurys snakes had turned his way. Dallion could feel her desperate attempts to protect him from the Overseer, along with the realization that she couldnt.

Highly unlikely. Personally, Im not convinced we have a cult either. Most likely, this is a result of the influx of artefacts that has flooded the city recently. Thats usually what happens after a new set

of ruins are discovered. But, please, by all means, continue with your search. If you succeed, Ill be more than grateful.

With that, the Overseer left the plaza, along with some of the higher-ranking city guards. Only the common one remained, starting the thankless job of waking up people and checking if they were alright.

Lets get out of here, Eury said.

Sure. Where to?

Outside. I need to be away from people for a while.

Chapter 257: Suspicions

The boundary between the city realm and the wilderness was like a gate to another world. Each time someone enteredawakened or notthey felt a faint sensation of change, similar to the feeling of finally returning home after a long day. Now that Dallion had passed the third gate, he could see the actual difference.

There was a giant bubble of control surrounding the city, forming a literal line in the sand. Beyond that line was the wildernessthe place where the citys rules ended.

Youll get a headache if you look too hard, Eury joked, then took a sip from her flask. Want some?

Sure, Dallion said, even if it was a lie.

The two of them had been in the wilderness for a while now, sitting on a large rock outside of the city silently. Once Eury finished drinking, she tossed him the flask. Dallion wiped it, then took a gulp. The water was bitter, almost tasting like alcohol. Considering the gorgons level of perception, the only explanation was that she liked that taste.

I never fit in, Eury said all of a sudden. There are both too many rules and too few. So many people are obsessed with keeping secrets, and at the same time, they accept that every pebble is watching them. They come to you when you have skills, only to tell you not to use them.

Dallion nodded. At times, he had gotten that impression as well.

Sometimes they tell you what to do in the hopes that you will. In other times, they want to be obeyed to the letter, and at the same time feel insulted if you point that out. Its just the gorgons snakes waved about.

This was the first time Dallion had heard her ranting. In a way, she reminded him of himself. He, too, had those problems. Just when he thought that he knew what was going on, something would happen, rendering him completely clueless again.

Is it about the Overseer? he asked, moving closer to her.

Not the Overseer. Everything else. Eury turned to face Dallion. You, of all people, should know what I mean. In this world I cant even look at people without turning them to stone.

Dallion was about to say that he could empathize when the realization suddenly hit him. Thinking back, he tried to remember the exact words, wondering if he had misheard.

Thats right, Eury said. Im not from this world either.

There was nothing left to say. Dallion knew that there were other awakened that had appeared in this world from Earth, but he had never considered that the same could be true for non-humans.

Soul-lost? he asked, just to confirm.

I hate that word. Soul-lost, soul confused, everything to replace the truth someone plucked out of their own world and brought here.

I never knew

Dont worry about it. I was the same at first until I met Jiroh.

Jiroh is one as well?

There arent many of us, that's why we look out for one another. There are a few more in Nerosal, but they prefer to keep to themselves. Some even left the city.

What were the chances? One of the first people Dallion had met had turned out to come from another world. That would explain why Jiroh had been so intent on helping him, regardless of the mess he got himself into.

Is Hannah one as well?

No. The gorgon laughed. The old witch is just annoying. She does have a soft spot for strays, though. Never could turn down someone in trouble. I dont know how she does it, but somehow she always knows. I dont ask either. As they say, everyone has a secret.

Dallion kept staring forward, trying to gather his thoughts.

Why didnt you tell me sooner?

I couldnt. Not before you passed the third gate. You havent noticed because its still all shiny for you, but in time you will.

What do you mean?

Look at me for a minute.

A weird request, though Dallion didnt mind. He had spent quite a long time looking at Euryale under various circumstances. He had always found her beautiful, beyond her appearance. Initially he had found her grey skin and braid-like snakes unusual, though had quickly gotten used to them to the point he considered them a normal day of everyday life in this world. Now, though, there was something different, a barely noticeable shimmering surrounded the gorgon, as if someone had laminated her.

Once he had spotted the effect, Dallion looked down at his hands. The shimmering was there. Slowly, he slid the fingers of one hand over the palm of his hand. His skin felt the same as it always had.

Cutouts, Euryale said. Thats what we are. Things that were added here even if they werent supposed to.

Can anyone see us? He turned his hands around.

Yes, and no. They dont see us shimmer, but they instinctively feel that were different, although they dont know why. In my case, its easier. People here arent used to gorgons. It was a nightmare back

home this worlds home. Perception being the gorgons great strength, they were onto me minutes after my awakening. One day I was there, trying to figure out what was going on, shifting through two sets of memories, and the next my parents gave me a travelling emblem and a sack of food and told me I had to leave I was seven.

Dallion swallowed. That was harsh. If the same had been done to him in Dherma, he wasnt sure he would have survived.

A gorgon guide took me to the nearest town. After that I was pretty much on my own.

Eury Dallion put his arm around her shoulder. I

Thanks. Sometimes even I need to vent. This whole thing with the Overseer reminded me of back then. Thats why I hate her so much. She throws people in the deep and never looks back. And then she behaves as if nothing had happened. The gorgon slammed the rock she was sitting on with her fist. I went back to see them a few years later. I had become an apprentice to the towns only awakened blacksmith and had managed to earn a bit. I foolishly thought that my parents would be happy to see me. Instead, they greeted me like a stranger, politely registering that I had survived. No one even asked what I was doing. Ive never gone to see them since.

That explained why Eury didnt want to talk about her past: one belonged to another world and the other wasnt something she liked to be reminded about. Back on Earth, a psychiatrist would have made a dissertation on the topic. Here, the only choice Eury had was to push on. It didnt help that gorgon society was a lot different from a human one.

Interesting what Jiroh had gone through. If she had come from another world, her experiences should have been different as well. From what Dallion had learned from Hannah, the fury had gone to Nerosal on her own accord, even if the reason wasnt perfectly clear or so the innkeeper claimed. As far as he was aware, Jiroh wasn't an outcast, and she had sometimes shared that she had a lot of fond memories of her tribe and family. Still, there was no guarantee she was talking about her family in this world.

What are you thinking about? Eury asked.

Just trying to wrap my head around it all. I didnt know I was so unique a moment ago.

Youre unique, alright. The gorgon ruffled Dallions hair. You dont have a predetermined limit.

Is this another complex fate thing I dont know about?

Sort of. It means that your potential is unlimited. Everyone is born with limits on skills and attributes. Some can only reach level fifteen on body, while others can push it up to a hundred. Those rules dont apply to us. With enough persistence, you reach any level you want.

Unlimited potential June had said something similar during Dallions house cleaning job. Now he understood what that really meant. He also felt somewhat sad about the people of this world. There was no telling how many people had reached their limit, realizing they couldnt go further than this. Dallion had been an awakened for less than half a year and had already reached the top four percent.

So, what happens now? he asked.

Aside from being able to discuss things that no one can understand? Nothing much. The gorgon shrugged. When Im done being pissed at the Overseer, Ill get back to doing her bidding as usual. Eury sighed. There was quite a lot of resentment coming from her. And try to keep you alive, which youre making extremely difficult.

Yeah The moment of revelation over, the normal everyday problems came crashing back in. In Dallions case, normal problems included the unusual interest the Star had towards him. Eury, theres something I need to tell you. Dallion removed his hand from her shoulder.

Dallions tone of voice alone was enough to make the gorgons expression become deadly serious.

The Star appeared in front of me. It was just for a few moments, Dallion preemptively added. You were gone to get a box, and he just appeared in your workshop out of nowhere. Now, once Dallion knew more about attributes, he could assume the Star had moved at a far greater speed that he could follow with the perception he had at the time. He asked me to kill the copyette.

Youre sure?

He gave me some slime bolts and told me to use them.

Slime bolts the gorgon repeated. Thats the third time hes helped you out. Quite the coincidence. Is there anything else you havent told me about?

Just one more thing hes from my world.

Shit! The gorgon stood up briskly. That means he can pretty much see you anywhere. Youre not in trouble with the Moons, right?

No, Dallion lied. As much as he wanted to share everything with Eury, there were some things he couldnt. The mark on his chest was a reminder of that. What does this have to do with the copyette?

Im not sure. But nearly all the people the Star has shown interest in have ended up like the creature you saw an hour ago. Most of them die before they get to do anything, but every now and again The gorgon didnt finish the phrase. Thats why I think the Overseers wrong. Artefacts alone cant cause this. Its not smugglers or the pool, or any of the dozens of fake reasons she comes up with. A Star cult has formed in the city and everyone is pretending everything is business as usual.

Wont the Order get involved?

Despite what theyd like to think, the Order isnt everywhere. Things fall through the cracks, especially with the pissing match between the nobles and clerics. If it wasnt for the Overseer, Id tell you to keep a low profile until after the festival. As things stand, dont go hunting alone. This will seriously mess up my schedule, but let me know when you set out. Ill be there.

Dallion was just about to say that there would be no arguments there, when Eury planted a deep kiss on his lips. Given the time theyd spent together, Dallion was supposed to get used to this by now, but even so, the gorgon always managed to catch him off guard. It had become her thing a subtle way to check his perception and reactions.

Im really lucky, Dallion said once the kiss was over. If I hadnt chosen Hannahs inn, Id never have met you or Jiroh.

You still would have. That's the thing about soul-lost. When we're in the same domain, we always are drawn to one another. Doesn't matter what level you are or what your perception is, we would have still bumped into each other. Why do you think so many are drawn to the capital?

This was the point at which Dallion had prepared a wisecrack as a remark. However, something else crossed his mind. If people from other worlds had limitless potential, that might explain why the copyette guarded by Vermilion had managed to escape. Time was not a factor here, and neither was race. One of the greatest generals the copyettes had seen could well be a shopkeeper transported to this world ages ago. The lack of limit would have ensured he rose to the top, as well as acquired the skills to escape any realm prison. Even more alarming, the copyettes presence would act as a magnet for any other soul-lost that emerged.

Euryale had said that a lot of them had been drawn to the Imperial capital. However, there was one other place Dallion knew of that had drawn a fair number in Nerosal itself—the inn that had offered work and shelter to Jiroh, Euryale, and Dallion.

Chapter 258: Hidden Gem

Continuing as if nothing had happened proved to be more difficult than Dallion expected. The suspicion that there could be a copyette in the inn he was staying, as well as chainlings walking freely in the city kept Dallion up the next few days.

Euryale had fixed the kaleidervisto box in less than an hour, but that hadn't helped. On the contrary, it had made him even more on edge than before. Each time he'd use it on a crowd either in the city or during his performance at work he subconsciously feared an attack. The fact that there weren't any only increased that fear. In many ways, it felt like the calm before a storm. Dallion's heightened senses let him feel there was something in the air, but were helpless to determine its source. Having people pour in the city for the festival didn't help either.

The greatest point of concern remained Hannah. While Dallion had managed to sneak a peak of Aspan with the kaleidervisto, the innkeeper remained elusive. From the very start, she was against him having the contraption, and even after being convinced it would be good for business, she remained out of sight during Dallion's lunch and evening performances. At one point Dallion considered just doing it directly without worrying about the consequences, but was quickly dissuaded by Nil. Thus, the game of cat and mouse continued.

Meanwhile, the improvement of his skills continued. Having passed the gate had removed the block, allowing him to increase his music skill to forty-six. His attack had also reached forty-four, with acrobatics and guard skills lagging behind at thirty-seven and thirty-four. To Dallion's great annoyance, it turned out that his heightened perception wasn't enough to reveal all marker layers. While they had gotten him to the verge of doing so, it was still not enough to be able to use his sky silver hammer, and as for using guard markers for defense it had turned out that Dallion now lacked the reaction level to make use of them.

On the bright side, the improvement of the training stiletto continued. The stiletto was now at level eighteen, still containing more silver than gold. According to Nil, the general standard was for a double digit awakened to be able to easily defeat any guardian beneath his level. Gold, according to the echo, while impossible at this point, became child's play at level fifty, which also was the threshold of being accepted as a noble.

One day later, Dallion was called for his first preliminary fight for the tournament. The experience turned out to be quite anticlimactic. His opponent, a teen from the Pearl White guild, proved no challenge at all to the point Dallion felt bad for defeating her. In many aspects, the encounter resembled Dallions first fight against March. The difference in level was obvious. There was nothing his opponent could do other than make desperate attempt after desperate attempt, only to give up in anger. Dallion had tried to say a few calming words using music skills, of course but there were some states that even music couldnt fix.

Keeping his perfect victory streak, Dallion was then told to wait for another few days until a suitable opponent could be found. From the brief conversation he had with a few of the administrators, he was pretty much guaranteed hed make it to the first round. Seer the word for awakened that had passed the third gate were nearly always a sure in.

Back at the Icepicker Guild, things had changed as well. All but sphere item jobs were pretty much put on hold as the guild started to prepare for the festival. As it turned out, the guild versus guild dynamic was a lot more bloodthirsty than Dallion expected. Given that this was one of the few times of the year during which guilds could face off directly, there was a lot of pent-up anger to let go of. The big five were always at their throats, eager to change, or keep, their current standing, and the smaller had a lot of petty issues to resolve between each other.

All Icepicker participating in the tournament, Dallion included, received special considerations, stopping short of actual training. Dallion was offered to borrow any equipment the guild had for free, but as it turned out his own weapons were better. However, there was one thing that caught his attention.

This is also for sale? Dallion examined a crude sky silver ring. It resembled more guitar steel than an actual ring, stretching almost as much as Dallions pinky finger.

No ones wanted it so far, Estezol replied. Normally this was the job of the guild treasurer and his assistants, but with massive preparations underway, Estezol had agreed to help Dallion out himself. The metals good, but the forgers got a shipment of raw ore from last week.

Dallion nodded. In nine cases out of ten it was hunters who brought it from the wilderness, and considering that Eury was the only hunter forger he knew and one with extremely good perception he could assume that was part of her recent mission.

Its fully fulfilled, Estezol went on. Thats the reason it was returned by the client who wanted it cleared.

Not something they wanted? Dallion asked.

Given that it has no powers whatsoever, I guess you can say that. They didnt even bother picking it up. Why do you ask?

I have something in mind. Dallion returned the ring to its place. Will you save it for me?

Itll be a pretty expensive decoration, but sure.

Thanks, Estezol. Any news about March?

Still doing a job. Shes cutting it a bit short this time. With the festival just over a week away, youd think shed be here to prepare, but thats March for you. The short man shrugged. Its not proper to

complain given how much she has helped the guild, but sometimes I can really see Adzorgs point of view.

That much I agree, but sinking a lot of money in a useless ring just because its made of sky silver is a bad idea. You can just as easily link him to the chain the gorgon gave you, or buy some ore off her directly. Itll be cheaper for one thing.

Do I get a discount? Dallion asked.

Not on this, sorry. Estezol sighed. Even with all the junk artefacts pouring in, special metals are hard to get.

Dallion should have expected as much. With a thanks, he left the guild. In truth, if he had the money available he would have bought the ring on the spot. However, given everything going on, he preferred to have some available emergency funds. Once the festival was over, though, it was the first thing he was going to do. The reason it wasnt about the ring being an artifact or made of sky silver for that matter; thanks to the sight granted to him, Dallion had seen miniature cracks within the realm of the ring itself. Considering that the ring was supposed to have been cleared, the cracks werent supposed to be there, not unless there was something else in there, something that the original team had missed.

Dal! Estezol shouted from the guild door, just as Dallion was heading back to the inn. Wait!

The bearded man rushed to him, then inconspicuously shoved the ring in his hand. Confused, Dallion looked at his hand, then at Estezol.

Its fine, the man whispered. Things get misplaced all the time.

This isnt Dallion began, but quickly lowered his voice to a level that only awakened nearby could hear. This isnt a useless trinket. This costs a lot. By his rough estimate, Dallion was going to need a few more weeks of exploration jobs at least to get the needed amount.

Its not like anyone will buy it. Besides, youve earned the guild ten times more when you got veil and Gloria to join. Think of it as a gift from me. No strings attached.

Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could tell that the man was being honest. He still felt uncomfortable accepting it, though.

You sure you wont get in trouble?

No chance, Estezol laughed. As long as you dont start telling everyone about it, youll be fine.

Just take it, dear boy. Why look a gift horse in the mouth? Its not often that you find a hidden realm, so best take advantage. It might be years before you come across another, if ever at all.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

At first, it almost seemed as if nothing had changed. Dallion remained on a street surrounded by buildings. However, all the people were gone. Not only that, but there was a giant tower right in front of him, rising to the sky.

You are in the land of GOBLET RING

The lands destiny has been fulfilled.

This looks a lot like a world item, Dallion said.

Some sphere items are like that. Remember the rescue job you went on? This is similar, only lacking in the reward department.

That certainly explained why the original owners had not claimed it. It must have cost a pretty sum to clear a ten-level sphere item. Learning that the item held nothing special must have come as a bitter shock, followed by massive disappointment. That was, unless the item belonged to a speculator who bought artefacts on the cheap, then had them leveled up to sell at a huge profit. With people like that, it was all about the numbers if the total was good a few duds were ignored.

How come no one saw the cracks? Dallion asked.

I know this is a concept that seems foreign to you, but mistakes do happen, dear boy. The number of improvement requests has skyrocketed. Add to that the approaching festival, its perfectly normal for a group of overworked guildies to miss something. Keep in mind that most of them still retain their job as inn awakened or assist in one of the repair and improvement shops. Relying on the guild alone for income is risky unless youre an elite.

The explanation sounded plausible. Dallion himself had led exploration teams when he was still a double digit. If he had come across such an item back then, hed have cleared it and been none the wiser. In fact, it was possible for that to have already happened.

So, what do I need to know?

Ill be sure to find you a good selection of scrolls that would explain the matter in detail. Since youre unlikely to read them, unlike Gen, Ill give you the short version.

Dallion grumbled on the inside. Once again, he was reminded in a not-so-subtle way that his echo was better than him when it came to learning.

Somewhere in this realm is a wall. Beyond that wall is a hidden part of the realm that holds something of considerable value, similar to the paradox cubes during your awakening trial.

No chance of it being empty?

None whatsoever. Theres no guarantee what you find will be to your liking. It might be to your liking, though. It might turn out to be a minor achievement or part of a skill group you havent learned.

That didnt sound too bad. From what Dallion had seen so far, nothing was lost when it came to awakened skills. Even when he had earned achievements increasing his stats beyond the level cap,

he had regained the amount after passing through the gate. Even getting a useless skill might prove useful later on, until which time it would serve as a decoration in his awakening room.

Any idea what I could expect to face?

Might be a protector, might be nothing at all. One never knows. Normally, the wall itself is impossible to break unless you have a key, but in your case, Nox will do.

Right. Nox was a key that could open any door.

Chapter 259: The Abandoned Hamlet

The realm turned out to be composed almost entirely of the city. The sensation was both fascinating and slightly spooky. It didn't help that there weren't any people to be seen. Dallion couldn't help but wonder what the realm had been like when it was full, and more importantly, what had caused it to become abandoned. No doubt the people of ages gone were far more adept at item creation than the current generation of awakened.

In the past, Dallion would have rushed to the tower as fast as possible to find the hidden area and claim his prize. Today, though, he felt in a mood for exploration. Since time didn't pass in the real world, there was nothing he would lose, not to mention that he might get an idea what to expect for the world item.

Initially, he started by going through the shops and larger buildings. All furniture and large tools were there, but there wasn't a single small or personal item to be seen. It was as if someone had created this vast building complex and was still waiting for the occupants to arrive.

Any idea what happened here? Dallion asked, going through what looked like a bank. While the technology was at the late medieval level, the execution was flawless, not to mention that the builders had come up with some clever ideas of their own. Mechanical mechanisms for one thing were quite interesting, reminding Dallion of the documentaries on Roman discoveries he had watched back on Earth.

There has to be something you know. Does the Order have any records?

Getting information from the order is like pulling teeth from a chicken. There's a lot of fuss, a lot of pain, and you end up getting nothing at all. There's as much information about item settlements as there is of ancient cities they are easy to find, occasionally contain valuables, but that's about it. There's no knowledge of how they were built, by whom, or even when.

And you've never asked the imprisoned guardians?

Dallion instantly regretted asking the question. That much was obvious, even for him. The reason why the imprisoned races wouldn't explain anything was because the Moons didn't allow it. Potentially, when he leveled up enough, he might be allowed to learn that information, but that was for another day.

Fine, Dallion said, and left the building.

After checking a few other houses, Dallion decided to leave the city and check what was outside. As expected, the endless plains and forests turned out to be the realm's limit. Regardless of how much he walked in a certain direction, the distance to the city wouldn't change. At one point, Dallion even

tried walking backwards, but each time he'd blink the city would get closer, as if attached to him by a rubber band.

EXTREME CURIOSITY

(Mind +2)

Everyone has that itch they want to scratch. Scratch it too much, though, and it might turn into a wound.

An achievement for this? Not that Dallion was complaining. Apparently, learning more about the world—the real world—was rewarded; and mind was an area that would prove useful. With that, he'd be able to split better as well as make use of the awakened markers.

Know anything about Vend? Dallion asked. When I try using the guild ring, he keeps telling me to practice and gets all vague when I ask him what he's doing.

This wasn't the first time Dallion had heard that. Most probably, that was due to his endless potential. Coming from another world had that effect, it seemed. That was good, but also could end up causing trouble. For one thing it had already attracted a mage.

Nox, Lux, get out here, Dallion said. Instantly the two familiars appeared, one on each shoulder. Seriously, guys? Dallion sighed.

Nox meowed in a smug fashion, then leapt on the ground. On the other shoulder, the firebird beamed with the kind of pride one got from copying an older brother.

Nox, do you smell anything I should worry about?

The crackling yawned, then shook its head. It was clearly growing up. No longer was it the small energetic cub, Dallion had found on the top of the well mountain. Now he was a small lazy cub that either slept or fought.

Okay, go ahead and find that hidden spot for me. I need to check something. Lux, lift me up.

The view from the sky was almost precisely what Dallion would have expected. The realm was little more than a circle divided into three zones. In the center there was the tower, reaching up as far as it could. Around it was the town, with its buildings and streets, and beyond that were forests and fields. There was no doubt that the realm was artificially made, very much like the training realms Nil made for the guild.

You're pretty good at making realms, Dallion remarked. Any coincidence?

I appreciate the compliment, dear boy, but you're on the wrong track. I only modify realms. A subtle difference, I know, but I can't build one from scratch.

So I have to become a crafter to do that?

No, not exactly. Crafting allows you to create an item in the real world. You have no control of the items realm. Sure, if you create an item of metal, the realm will have metal, but you dont determine whats inside. Its more of a surprise. My considerable talents are to take that and remodel it into something somewhat different. Within limit, of course.

I see.

Despite the many windows, it soon became clear that there was no way to enter the tower from above. Even the top had nothing but a roof. After having Lux fly several circles around it, Dallion asked the familiar to get him to the towers ground entrance. As expected, Nox was there, curled on the ground, waiting.

I take it you didnt find anything? Dallion bent down and petted the crackling. You really can be a ball of fluff, sometimes. Come on, lets get inside.

The tower was exactly what one would expect: an outer circle of winding stairs heading up and a further door forward to the rooms within the core. Part of Dallion expected the core of the tower to be one big library, but it ended up being closer to an apartment complex. A small corridor led to the circular garden area, where all rooms could be entered. Dallion peeked in out of curiosity, but found they were completely empty.

Satisfied that there was nothing of importance, Dallion went to the stairway, starting his ascent up. The second floor turned out to be a copy of the first, as were the third and fourth. At the fifth, Dallion had already given up the idea of checking every room, even if there was a potential achievement at stake. Instead, he let Nox guide him.

Seventeen floors later, the crackling stopped climbing the stairs and dashed into the central area of the room.

The atmosphere was quite different. The garden was replaced by a rather impressive statue of a smith. On closer examination, Dallion recognized Centor, the red Moon. The artist had definitely made him more impressive than Dallion remembered him to be. Clearly, artists wanted to remain on good terms with their patrons.

His depiction suggests that this is a crafting area, Nil said. Most likely the forging section of the tower.

I saw a few forges in the city. Why is this different?

Those are simple forgers. This is rather a place where forging methods are tested out and discovered.

That made sense. Who better to seal off the entrance to a hidden area than a forge or mason?

Meow, Nox tapped at one of the nearby doors with his paw, careful not to claw at it. That behavior was more than likely Nils doing. The old echo wouldnt allow anything to damage his precious scrolls and tomes, including a vicious crackling.

Dallion went to the door in question and opened it. The inside of the room was full of ingots. Initially Dallion had some hopes there might be some magic metals, or if not gold, but it turned out that they were nothing more than ordinary iron bricks. Between the rows of carefully arranged ingots, at the far wall, a faint purple light was seeping through.

Lux, clear this.

As fast as a flash, the firebird flew into the room and shoved the ingots away from the wall. There were a few moments during which Dallion felt bad about ordering his familiars about, but watching the ingots move from place to place, as if teleporting, quickly changed his thoughts on the matter. Soon enough, there was only one thing left to do.

Your turn, Nox.

Dillion stood in front of the wall. The outline of the door was visible, made out of faint light. In a way, it reminded him of the door he had to open to unseal his mothers awakening powers. Back then, that had also earned him a prize, probably the greatest one hed ever received. Even so, it wasnt for the reward that hed done it. All that he wanted back then was to make his mother happy and give her what she had lost, but even so, he hadnt been able to force himself to stay.

With a meow the crackling dashed to the wall. Faster than Dallion, it clawed all over the stone surface. Causing cracks to appear. There was no elegance in it, but it was extremely efficient. In no time at all fragments started falling off, followed by the entire wall collapsing into an entirely different chamber.

Wow, Dallion said, looking into something that shouldnt have been able to fit. The chamber alone was at least fifty feet long, leading to another massive flight of stars.

The special thing about hidden areas is that they arent part of the realm they are in. Think of them as a realm within a realm.

Like the secret in the house I helped clean? Dallion summoned his harpsisword.

In a way. The difference is that the ancients were much better at creating realms back then. The secret in the house was an object in a domain. Not that its easy to achieve, but compared to this This is on a whole different level. Which is all the more reason to be careful.

Lux, on my back, Dallion said. I might need you to fight.

Slowly, he stepped forward. Walking through the wall felt like passing a threshold. No sooner had he done so than a red rectangle emerged.

COMBAT INITIATED

Shield! Dallion said out of habit. The shield extended slightly, protecting more of his torso.

The new realm was little more than a stone path leading to an amber dais atop a hill not too far away. All around them were trees with pink-colored maple leaves. As much as Dallion tried, though, he wasnt able to see or sense any enemy.

Any luck, Nox?

The crackling looked around, its tail high in the air. Even it couldnt locate the threat.

Dallion lowered his harpsisword. As a gamer, he just knew that his opponent would appear the moment he approached the dais. No doubt the treasure whatever it was was locked up in a chest there. Technically, Dallion was given a choice he could just leave and potentially avoid the combat, but then he wouldn't get the prize either.

Very well, Dallion said with a smile. You win. He went forward along the stone path.

Chapter 260: The Bladeler

The protector appeared just as Dallion had predicted, flying down from the sky the instant Dallion's foot touched the first step to the dais. The entire sky exploded in cyan light, after which a large form swooped down, landing in the middle of the staircase.

PROTECTOR

Species: Bladeler

Class: Light

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills

- **Flight**
- **Line slashing**
- **Wing shield**
- **Wing shards**

Weak Spots: Unknown

This was the second protector Dallion had faced, although for all practical reasons, it might well be said to be the first. The being was a cross between winged armor and swords. Bright cyan light shone from within, connecting the pieces of metal, making Dallion wince when he tried to look at its face. For a moment, he could almost swear that he saw a small metal crown on its head.

A bladeler, Nil stated the obvious. Think of it as a colossus made of blades. I haven't seen a winged one in quite a while. A word of warning, despite appearances, the protector is made entirely of blades. That's not armor you're seeing, but blades that fit together to create the illusion of armor. Also beware the wings.

The wings on closer examination were rows of swords attached to the armor's back. Each of them was made of an alloy that Dallion didn't recognize, possibly one of the seven metals that he wasn't familiar with. It was also obvious that they were nearly flawless. The invisible flaws in the metal were few and difficult to take advantage of. The same could be said for the armor, although it was effectively made of steel.

Arent you fancy? Dallion asked, using his music skills to put some dizziness into his enemy. Any chance of us coming to an agreement? Its very likely the people who made this are long dead, along with their ancestors. Protecting an empty chest isnt a good use of your time.

The vibrations seemed to bounce off. Whatever the protector was, music didnt have any effect. That made things a bit more complicated.

Do I at least get your name before we start the fight? Dallion asked, this time using his music skills to calm and hasten himself. This was the first time he had tried such a combination, but at this point, he would be happy at every advantage he could get.

There went the option of a draw, not that Dallion had high hopes. The title protector suggested that fighting them wouldnt be as easy as facing a normal guardian.

Slowly, Dallion inched forward. The moment he did, the bladeler threw two blades in his direction without even an instant of hesitation.

Instantly, Dallion jumped up. Lux! he shouted, just in time to avoid another three blades that flew his way.

You didnt warn me hes a ranged attacker! Dallion kept flying about, avoiding the waves of daggers that flew in his direction. Even splitting barely helped, allowing him to avoid being hit two times out of five.

PERMANENT EFFECT - BLEEDING

You have been scarred by the attack. The scar will continue bleeding in the real world until the status is removed.

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

A red rectangle appeared in one of Dallions instances. Immediately, Dallion chose another. Any permanent effects he could avoid would be better than the alternative.

Suddenly, the protector leapt into the air. His wings extended, revealing rows of swords, but instead of flying off towards Dallion, this time they flapped. The sight was almost mesmerizing. No physics on Earth would allow the event to take place, but in this world, that wasnt an issue. The wings managed to pull up the bladeler up to the point at which he was level with Dallion.

A momentary pause followed.

Normally, that wouldnt be an issue, but in this case, Dallion had a clear disadvantagehe wasnt the one flying. Instead, all his orders were given to Lux, who took care of the execution. And as fast as the firebird was, it took considerably more time for it to figure out exactly what Dallion wanted.

Two bluish blades separated from the wings, flying directly at Dallions head and chest. White and green markers emerged, displaying the ways Dallion could evade or block the attack. The achievement hed recently earned had definitely made a big difference when it came to combat. However, Dallion ignored all the suggestions, instead choosing to deflect the blades with a circular slash with his harpsisword. A loud clang filled the air, as the force of the strike pushed Dallion back. Deflected, one of the blades flew back to the protectors wing. The other continued to fly towards the ground, split in two parts.

Just how much stronger can that thing get?

The answer didnt take long. The protector reached forward. A series of blades flew off his armor, combining in one large sword. The new blade extended over five feet in length. However, the surprises didnt stop there. Holding the hilt with both hands, the bladeler performed a horizontal slash.

Shield! Dallion reacted immediately, holding the shield in front of him. Its metal segments increased in size, forming a metal semicircle just as the invisible strike crashed against. As before, the strength was considerable, but that wasnt the attacks greatest danger. From the corner of his eyes, Dallion saw the strike continue past on both sides of the shield. So it went on for hundreds of feet, chopping off tree branches as it vanished into the horizon behind Dallion.

That, dear boy, is a line slash. Hopefully, you get to learn it as well at some point

Incredible! Dallion didnt even want to think what attack level was necessary to perform this. Days ago, he was so pleased with himself for nearing level fifty on attack. Now, he felt that he was barely halfway there. A strike that not only could hit from a distance but also damages everything in its path. It was fortunate that the armadil was of such high quality, or maybe it would have snapped as well.

Summoning his dartbow, Dallion moved his shield just enough to fire a bolt at the protector, before moving the shield back in front of him again.

You okay, shield? Dallion asked, even if he didnt expect an answer.

A loud cling sounded, though without a red rectangle. That could only mean that dartbows werent remotely effective.

In the back of his mind, Dallion feared that the shield might be somewhat hurt by what he intended to do. Hopefully, the attack would prove less powerful than the isle snake. And just to be certain, Lux was also going to lend a hand.

Dallion thrust forward, propelled by the firebird on his back like a miniature rocket engine. At one point there was a loud thump, as the shield crashed against the protector.

Now! Dallion shouted.

The edges of the shield which had already flipped direction moments before the crash extended more, forming a sphere round the blade. This wasn't the first time Dallion had used this method against enemies, however, in this instance, the enemy fought back. Furious clanging came from the shield, as the protector struck the inside as furiously as possible.

The sounds of metal hitting metal continued. The protector persisted with his attempts to escape the trap, and by the looks of things, he was succeeding. Elements of the shield moved back and contracted, relenting under the pressure. It didn't seem like they would be able to withstand the punishment for long.

With a flash, Dallion found himself a few feet above the dais. A single chest could be seen, made entirely from iron.

The dryad won't be able to handle the attacks for much longer, dear boy.

I know! Dallion said through gritted teeth.

All he was waiting for was Nox. It took two seconds for the crackling to reach the dais for Dallion, it felt like an eternity. The cub instantly leapt at the chest, clawing it with both front paws. There was a faint sound, like tin crying. Streaks of light leaked through cracks in the chest. Then, a second later, the whole thing exploded in a ball of light.

ATHLETIC skills obtained

The rectangle made Dallion feel as if time had stopped for a moment. In his mind, he thought that he'd just receive another increase of the mystery stat, allowing him to finally discover what it was. Instead, he had gotten a skill which was more than he could have hoped for. That made six skills he had learned so far, and while forging still caused problems, the levels of the remaining five could be increased easily.

The joy didn't last long. Moments after releasing the prize, Dallion's shield contracted again, releasing the protector.

Lux, get us away! Dallion shouted.

The firebird complied, thrusting Dallion away from his enemy with almost the exact speed as the series of blades that were directed towards the awakened's head. Time felt as if it had frozen again. Green guard markers appeared, suggesting ways for Dallion to deflect the weapons using his shield. Splitting into three instances, Dallion tried all the options provided. To his relief two of them worked without incident. The third one failed, resulting in a severed arm.

Nil, what will happen if I just leave?

That is not the best idea. Battles against guardians are meant to continue until the end. Unless you use your guard skills, the Moons won't like it.

That didnt sound good at all. Dallion didnt want to fight the monstrosity, but he didnt want to get on the Moons bad side either, not when he had a promise to keep to one of them.

And if I return to the main part of the realm?

Thats a difficult one to answer. In general, hes supposed to follow you, although this is the first time Ive seen anyone claim the prize before the fight is over. Its not out of the realm of possibility that youll lose their favor.

Why do you think that the skill level cap no longer applies to you? Youve been favored by the moons, and should you try to openly break their rules, youll face some punishment.

Dallion hadnt even noticed. He had been so overwhelmed with everything that had happened in the last few days, not to mention pleased at having passed the awakened gate, that it had completely slipped his mind. Normally, he shouldnt have been able to increase any skill beyond forty. The fact that he had without issue suggested that there was more to Felgyns boon than the Moon had shared. Of course, that made him further indebted to the deities.

Fine, Ill fight him! Dallion said at last. But that doesnt mean I wont play dirty.

Orange markers appeared, indicating the best way to throw the dagger at the enemy. One direct hit in the head with that, and there was a strong possibility that everything would be over. Dallion, however, had something else in mind. Waiting for the bladeler to throw his next set of blades, Dallion aimed at the protectors left wind and threw the dagger.