

The Silver City, ???
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“Wow.”

“That is quite an astute observation Paul, glad you noticed.” Awiita followed the others through the portal last, stitching reality back as she found it behind her as she did.

While all of her kind have been blessed with imagination that far surpasses the average mortal comprehension, Awiita took great pride in the things she created, and what lay before the four competitors was truly a sight to behold, if she did say so herself.

They stood upon a crystalline platform, which caught what seemed to be the starlight shining down from the sky to create a prismatic shimmer of colors. Outside of the endless pinpoints above the sky was dark, despite it having been mid-afternoon when they left New York City only moments ago. The platform was translucent, with no visible bottom beneath them, nor any clear indication of how the platform was suspended, even though each person present could sense that it was anchored in the air rather than being at ground level. In the background lay a cityscape, every bit as large as New York's, but even more impressive in its glory, as it appeared to be made of the same material as what they stood upon.

That, however, wasn't what had drawn the remark from Paul. No, that would be the chaotic display before them, the thing that Awiita had brought them together to take part in.

It was an obstacle course.

The same kind of which you would see on a program such as Survivor, but on a far grander scale. They stood at what one could only assume was the start, before them a cargo net made of a material that could be best described as “rope adjacent”, divided into four differently colored sections for each competitor, with an icon that corresponded with each of their cards on the ground in front of each colored section. This fed into a large, clear chamber that contained what appeared to be several large balance scales, seemingly some kind of puzzle for them to solve before they would continue past what they could see from their current vantage point.

There was a great silence that settled upon the gathered group, each taking in the sight and one by one any sense of enthusiasm drained from them as quickly as the air would escape a balloon pierced by an arrow shot from a bow being gleefully held by the hostess.

“Isn’t it simply the most impressively crafted method for determining the one true victor for a contest that you’ve ever seen?” The Shadowkin’s smile dazzled as she pushed past the group in order to stand before them, gesturing broadly towards her creation.

“You cannot be serious right now.” Yelena Gorgo uttered, biting back the venom she felt in the moment for what was being asked of them. While she had no fear of the being before her, she wasn’t interested in tipping her hand for how she truly felt quite yet. A disqualification would make all of this a massive waste of her time. More of one, anyways.

“Oh, deathly so! I was tasked with making sure the most deserving of you walked away with the biggest prize available today, and I am not about to shirk my responsibilities.” Awiita made a “tut-tut” noise before she walked from person to person, gauging their reactions.

Paul was busy studying the structure, making mental notes on what he felt would be his best strategy to complete it. This focus pleased the woman, who once more mussed his hair before continuing.

Ceridwen’s attention was less on the obstacle before her and more those around her, sharp eyes darting between those opponents. That served in contrast to the coolness of her expression, which remained steadfast in an attempt to keep the others from getting a proper read now that things were truly about to get underway.

Awiita moved down the line to Gabriel Baal, who simply gave a nod in understanding before he moved to stand upon the emblem of The Stone. This caused Awiita to give an enthusiastic clap before declaring to the gathered group. “Okay, Gabriel gets it! Everyone to their spots!”

With it being clear that any sort of debate on the matter wasn’t going to get anywhere, the remaining trio took their positions upon their respective emblems.

The Shadowkin moved to her own position upon a raised podium from which she could better see the action. Once there she produced a jewel-encrusted scepter that flared out into a round tip, raising it into the air as she called out, “ready? Three, two, one... begin!”

When the final word left her lips, the round section of the scepter launched into the sky, erupting into a brilliant display of fireworks as the four competitors began their ascent up the netting.

Paul made it to the top first, scampering up with a seeming fluidity in his movements. Upon reaching the platform he was greeted by one of the scales he had spotted from the ground, a side tipped down by a securely attached weight bearing his name. A pile of what appeared to be gold coins sat upon a large platter, and upon each of them was a different adjective that struck him as oddly particular.

Honest. Vicious. Obstinate. Jovial, amongst others.

The others had similar setups awaiting them when their climbs ended. It seemed simple enough, balancing the scales in order to achieve their goal to move onto the next step.

The alarm bells went off in each of their heads to watch for any sign of deception.

Nevertheless, Ceridwen opted to try the obvious, grabbing an armful of the coins and dropping them upon the empty tray that sat to one side of the scale.

It didn't budge.

The woman sighed, clearing the metal so she could start anew.

Paul shifted through the coins, spreading them out to see if having the big picture of the objects would reveal some deeper meaning present upon them. Despite having that brief lead, the young man felt it evaporate amongst the clinking sound of the metal as he moved it.

Yelena circled the scale, examining both it and the stand that held it. Her fingers tapped upon the surface before she grabbed it to give it a shake. No matter how much force the woman applied it wouldn't move. She made a thoughtful noise before her vision flashed emerald, which caused her to step backwards and close her eyes.

Gabriel lifted a coin in each hand, feeling the weight of them and studying the surface: rather than being engraved, each piece seemed to bear the lettering affixed to the otherwise smooth surface, lending to the difference in how they felt. He set both down upon the pile before grabbing a coin with "Astute" on it, adding it to the scale. He watched as the scale gently lowered just enough to be noticeable. A wry smile crossed the man's lips as he began to dig for other words.

It didn't take long for the others to notice; soon, all had embarked upon the same process. Awiita watched on as one-by-one they discerned the task at hand, digging through their trays for the correct words to tip their scales. The Shadowkin slipped the scepter under her arm before clapping her hands, a giddy little grin on her face as she bounced in place. "Remember everyone," she said in a loud almost singsong, "Honesty is the best policy!"

Piece by piece, they worked, trial and error abounding as each competitor attempted to parse out which coins truly applied to them. Did Paul consider himself neurotic? Perhaps Gabriel was more aloof than he saw himself.

There was no second guessing involved as Ceridwen placed "impetuous" upon her scale.

All except Yelena Gorgo, who worked quickly and efficiently at the task once she had recovered from whatever had passed over her. Determined, stubborn, spiteful, relentless, each coin tilted it further, until at last she watched as the device leveled out. There was a loud click as a door that stood before her first unlocked before it slid open. The light coming from it was blinding, preventing any view of what lay beyond that threshold, but there was no hesitation as she stepped through triumphantly.

The others would need to catch up.