

Leveling up 691

Chapter 691: Entrance Guardian

ENTRANCE GUARDIAN

Species AETHER LION

Class: MAGIC

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY 20**
- **MIND 40**
- **PERCEPTION 40**
- **REACTION 40**
- **MAGIC 40**

Skills

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **SPELLCRAFT**

- **MAGIC SURGE (Species Unique)**

Weakness: HEART

The white rectangle appeared in the air. Simultaneously, the magic beam split into smaller threads, each of which twisted, bursting in all directions. At first it seemed like an explosion of thin magical streamers, but soon enough the threads created an outline, an outline of something very massive, and thanks to the rectangle, Dallion didnt need to see the complete form to know what he would be facing.

Move back! Dallion shouted as he split into instances.

Towering above everyone, the creature was the size of a castle. Its claws and teeth were several times larger than any of the five participants.

From the corner of his eye, Dallion saw Cheska start a spell. According to the symbols, it was a protective spell. That meant he had to act before she finished it.

Charging his blade with spark, he did a horizontal line attack at the creature. The shimmering line of destruction flew forward, just in time to avoid the green magic barrier that emerged moments later. Mercilessly, it hit the vast creature and

AVERAGE STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 50%

The moment the thread dug into the lion, part of its body transformed into clusters of threads. Tens of thousands of them were snapped without issue, yet the further the strike went, the more strength it lost, until it simply vanished away. The moment that happened, the threads merged together again, recreating the lions body.

So much about spark attacks, Dallion thought. Of course, he could keep on attacking and eventually kill off the guardian through brute force. A spark infused line attack had managed to shave off five percent of the monsters life total. Nineteen more and victory was guaranteed. Of course, that would leave Dallion a bit too vulnerable for the challenges to follow. Besides, that was not the proper way to do things. The test wasnt meant to test advanced hunting techniques, it was meant to test the spellcraft skills of gifted children.

Iksa also crafted a few spells of her own. Dallion expected the standard lightning or fire attack that were so common, but instead, the girl composed a four-circle projectile spell of hardened magic. That definitely wasnt something that had been taught in class. Dallion couldnt recognize half of the symbols that went into creating it.

Does everyone have echo advisors? he asked, focusing on the creatures right eye. Within moments, a targeting marker appeared so as to facilitate anyone with attack spells.

What do you expect? Nil snorted. And dont be a hypocrite. Ive been with you for ages! Since long before you were actually competent.

Dont remind me.

Magic spells and awakening markers were everywhere. Realizing that defense would be better for the moment, Dallion summoned his armadil shield, then focused on the defense area. With them being a team, if he could manage a sequence of guard actions, time would slow down for everyone, giving them more time to cast spells.

The issue was that with a creature this big, completing a guard series wasnt as easy as one might think. One single strike from the lions paw and the sprll barriers Cheska had created were no more, shattered like glass, their fragments fading away into nothing.

All five of the novices split into instances, rushing away from the attack. Watching them use half a dozen instances made Dallion almost feel pity; it also brought back the painful realization of what he must have been like during his item exploration days. Back then, he had thought of it as such a major achievement, and maybe it was for some. For someone like March and the other captains, though, he was no more than a gifted overenthusiastic novice that needed constant help and supervision.

Stay back! he shouted. Ill charge it!

Thats not the way, dear boy, Nil sighed.

Thats my way. Dallion gritted his teeth, holding a weapon that was almost as high as him.

Iksas spell was complete, launching projectiles like a machine gun. Each of them flew along a separate trajectory, guided to the target marker Dallion had set up for the group.

Theyre good, Dallion thought. In a way, they reminded him of Gloria back when the two of them had faced the sand dragon. Dallions way of fighting had changed a lot since then. Nowadays, rarely was he relying on markers, making use of massively destructive attacks, combat splitting, and all the familiars at his disposal. Looking at Iska, he could almost see himself aiming at the eye of a massive monster, equipped with nothing but a dartbow.

The guardian snarled as the projectiles hit their mark.

MINOR HIT

Damage dealt is increased by 10%

A series of red rectangles stacked up.

That spell did more damage than my line attack? Dallion wondered.

It followed the proper rules, dear boy, Nil reminded.

The lions health had already fallen to eighty-five percent. However, that only made it angrier. Its paw slammed the ground, causing all magic threads to vibrate. Everyone, Dallion included, were tossed up as if theyd been on a trampoline.

Blue flaming wings emerged from Dallion as Lux appeared, enveloping him with his flames. Of the remaining three, Cheska managed to cast a levitation spell, keeping pinning her in the air. Phoil and Raven were thrown up, but had the acrobatic skills to land back on their feet. So far, they had been doing remarkably little. One thing of note was that Phoil had taken the role of the black-haireds bodyguard.

Lux, boost me towards

Before Dallion could finish, symbols appeared all over the aether lions body. The spell was too vast to see in its entirety, but it was undoubtedly complex.

Out of instinct, Dallion split into a hundred instances. Moments later, he was glad to have done so. Threads of magic shot out of the lions mane in all directions. In two seconds, ninety of Dallions instances were gone, impaled by the attack.

Despite the initial shock, Dallion saw this as an advantage, quickly evading the attacks, deflecting those he couldnt with his shield, as he completed a guard sequence in the process. Yet, even after doing so, the guardian seemed as fast as before.

Its not working! Dallion thought.

The entire realm is made of magic, Nil said. And magic

Its the trait of exceptions, Dallion finished for him.

Performing a spark infused point attack right at the aether lions nose, Dallion then split again into a hundred instances and had Lux fly him away as quickly as possible.

Another red rectangle emerged. Dallion didnt even bother to look at the result, he knew that such a strike was nowhere near defeating the creature. All he had done was to gain some time.

Only magic works! he shouted while flying. Everything else just annoys him.

I can kill it, Raven shouted. I just need to strike its heart.

Just that?

Even if it were achievable, which it wasnt, Dallion didnt see what good it would do. Raven had no weapons and even if he could summon one, there wasnt much he could do, not against a creature so big. Even so, Ravens request did present an idea.

Surround the guardian! Dallion turned back around, charging at the aether lions head. Ill keep attracting his attacks. Cheska, Ikksa, focus on defensive spells.

If there was a moment when Raven would try to reclaim his authority, this was it. Dallion could see blobs of anger form within the boy like mushrooms after rain. To his surprise, the black-haired didnt say a thing. It was as if he wanted to, but a far wiser echo had told him to follow the instructions.

Another series of symbols appeared on the guardians mane, this time changing his body into fire. While impressive, that wasnt particularly threatening. No one was using standard attacks, and spells had the tendency to work on everything.

A series of defense barriers of magic formed on both sides of the massive creature. Iska and Cheska were doing their job. Also, everyone had resorted to the ever so popular spell haste allowing them to traverse the huge distance and flank the guardian.

Dallion did another point attack. Before it could reach its target, a circle of symbols emerged on the fiery mane, creating a magic shield in front of the aether lions face. A loud clash thundered, pushing the massive monster dozens of feet back. In the grand scheme of things that was hardly anything at all, but from the point of view of those on the ground, it appeared to be a devastating blow.

Nice to see youve picked up on my attacks, Dallion said, using his music skills to fill his words with anger and self-confidence.

In more cases than not, magic had the ability to counteract music, but that was only true when the target was paying attention. If not, mages and magical creatures were just as gullible as everyone else, and Dallion there were no scholar skills in the guardians white rectangle.

Having trouble against a bunch of kids? Dallion kept on taunting. If I were my usual size, Id have sliced you up by now. Even now I could.

A deep growl came from the guardian. The large eyes narrowed, focusing on Dallion as the main irritant. The large orbs of anger that formed within the creature only showed Dallion that he was on the right track. Of course, now that he had attracted its attention, there was the small problem of him having to deal with its response.

Normally, a creature this size would try to squish Dallion or cut him to shreds with its massive claws. In this case, though, it chose something different. The aether lion opened its mouth in a majestic roar, yet along with the sound came the triple spell circle on the verse of completion.

Crap!

Dallion did another series of point attacks in the hope of piercing the magic barrier and disrupting the spell. Unfortunately, he failed.

The symbols of the spell flashed into existence. A tear emerged from the guardians mouth, ripping reality itself as it moved forward. The barrier, nearly all of Dallions instances, even the sky of the realm itself was torn like a sheet of paper.

What the heck was that? Dallion asked.

Thats Moon magic, Harp replied from within his realm.

Moon magic. Up to recently, it existed only as a theoretical concept in an old scroll. Seeing it in practice, Dallion understood why he had been sought after. He didnt have nearly the knowledge to pull that off, but when he did, hed be able to tear realms apart, then stitch them back together again.

Three of his remaining instances looked back. The tear in the sky was still there, as if opening a portal to a realm of glowing magenta. If Dallions reaction trait hadnt been so high, if the instances he was able to create were a bit less, the trial might have ended for him before it started.

Get ready! Dallion shouted, more to his teammates than the guardian.

After what had happened, no one had the luxury to hesitate. It had become clear that the guardian couldnt be defeated through normal means, so the only solution was to give it a taste of its own medicine.

Bursting into instances yet again, Dallion darted to the ground. His aim was to reach the space right between the aether lions front paws.

The guardian must have feared an attack on his side, for his mane cast another magic barrier protecting all the lions head and front torso.

Nice trick! Dallion shouted, gripping the hilt of his harpsisword. Jokes are on you, though! I never planned on attacking you outright!

Spellcraft and attack, he thought.

Everyone! Draw a symbol in front of you! Lets do a combined spell!

Chapter 692: Allowed Entrance

In theory, multi-casting was no different than any other type of spellcraft. The principles were identical: as long as the appropriate symbols were created on an adequate frame connecting them all; the spell was supposed to work no differently than if it had been gone by one person. Having five people cast in unison, though, was as difficult as trying to draw a painting using five hands, none of which knew what the rest was doing.

Suspecting the capabilities of echoes involved, Dallion gambled that they would be able to give proper advice to the owners to achieve the spell. Splitting into instances again, he drew a hundred

and ten different symbols, while two instances thrust to his nearest neighbors to ask what the symbols should be.

To his astonishment, in both cases he received the same answer: none.

A four-symbol spell activated, creating a tornado of energy beneath the guardian. Before the creature could react, it was thrust up into the air. From this angle, its weak spot was clearly visible. Dallion knew that within seconds spells would be cast, piercing the aether lions chest in the area of his heart. Given the effectiveness of magic projectiles, that would be more than enough to defeat the guardian. The best thing was to stay back and let the others deal with it. However, a voice deep inside him didnt let him do so. Aware that he didnt have the knowledge to cast a projectile spell, or the skills to create one, Dallion did the next best thinghave his instances perform a spark infused point attack right at the guardians weak spot.

The strings of the harpsisword vibrated as the blade pierced the air, sending a vast amount of force forward like a bullet of air.

Hundreds of symbols formed all over the guardians fiery mane, but at this point, it was already too late.

COMBINATION ATTACK

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

Red rectangles emerged, followed by a series of magical attacks from everyone else. Dozens more rectangles stacked up, all dealing vast amounts of damage to the unprotected area of the aether lion.

The health indicated on the white rectangle reached zero, then remained there long after the attacks had ceased.

Pull back! Dallion and Raven shouted in near unison, as the massive body of the guardian started its way back to the ground.

How long does it take to die? Dallion thought as he flew up in order to avoid the effects of the slam.

Depends on many things, but might be minutes or even more, Nil replied.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED THE ENTRANCE GUARDIAN

A purple rectangle emerged, taking most of the sky.

YOU ARE ALLOWED TO PROCEED TO GALATEAS REALM

Already the body of the aether lion had gone back to being a wireframe of magic threads. Glowing in an incandescent light they moved about, creating a new framework. A twenty-foot-high archway formed on the ground. Once complete, it became clear that it led to another realm altogether.

Dallion kept staring, unable to see the rest of his group. This was the first time he had seen the strange spiky hills and stringy forests, and yet it seemed familiar, as if hed been there his entire life.

Raven, Dallion shouted. Phoil? Cheska?

There was no response.

Lux, fly over it, he ordered. Iksa?

The firebird took him above the arch to the side that had been invisible to him. To his horror, no one was there. It was as if the rest of the group had vanished. Dallion felt a brief sharp pain in his stomach. Had he lost them? Or had they lost him? When it came to magic, there was too much he didn't know.

It's fine, Nil said. Walk in.

What about the rest?

You're still holding yourself back with stupid thoughts. If the arch is a gateway, why do you think it'll only be active on one side?

Dallion thought about it for a few moments, then split and had one of his instances fly through. The moment it did, reality was forced upon Dallion, cutting off all the instances left in the world behind.

You took your time, Cheska shouted, waving at Dallion from the ground. What happened?

Gently, Dallion landed on the ground. As he did, the flaming wings diminished, until they became nothing but a thin layer of flame that covered Dallion's entire body.

I wanted to check something, Dallion lied. So, what now?

Now, we start searching, Raven replied. That was just the entrance test.

And what exactly must we do?

That's what we need to find out. It doesn't involve anything as crass as fighting. We need to

A riddle, Dallion interrupted. We need to solve a riddle.

It's more than a riddle. Raven frowned. In order to find the answers, we must first find the questions.

That was the basic logic for every awakening trial. Dallion remembered Nil using that explanation ages ago.

You don't know. Dallion looked at the black-haired. He wasn't talking to the boy, though, but the echoes inside. None of you actually know.

The children looked at each other. If this had taken place back in the Learning Hall, Dallion would have laughed, maybe even made a sarcastic comment or two. Now, though, he was both pleased and annoyed. Annoyed because the people orchestrating this had proven they weren't as smart as they thought they were; pleased, because he'd have a chance to find the solution himself and liked the challenge.

What do you know? he asked.

The full trial was to reach the Moon himself, Raven said. That was back during the early days of the Academy. The first archmages were chosen by making their way all the way through the realm. The

novices trial was just to get near There was a slight pause. Its said that an archway leading back to the real world will be there. If were lucky, Galatea might be waiting for us as well.

That wasnt much of an explanation. Enroy had said as much before the start of the trial.

Does anyone know why disciplines were topical when the trial was last conducted?

Everyone but Raven looked at each other.

Seriously? You went through all the trouble to find a group to get here and you

The trial isnt in this realm, Raven suddenly said, his voice a lot sharper than before. The whole realm isnt a realm, but a series of interconnected, ever-shifting realms. Realms within realms. In order to reach our goal, we must open the doors that lead to those realms, then venture through them until we get where we must.

So, the door was just a hint of whats to come?

Yes. Some of the realms will have harsh environments, others beings to fight us. The Moon wont allow anyone to be killed, but failure will not be tolerated. Whoever messes up will be taken out of this realm and returned to the real world at precisely the moment we gathered within the columns.

And I suspect we have to figure out which realms to go through and all that?

No one said it would be easy. Raven turned around and started walking. Everyone except Dallion did the same.

Id really like to know what the echoes are telling them. Dallion crossed his arms.

Youre not thinking of invading the realm of a fellow mage, are you, dear boy?

Maybe thats what they deserve.

You cannot just take everything you want. Ignoring the fact that its impossible for someone of your level, its extremely immoral.

I wont conquer their realms, Nil, just have a chat with the echoes.

If that were the case, why not link your realm to theirs and let the echoes venture into your realm?

Dallion found that he couldnt give an adequate answer to that question. While he honestly had no intention of invading anyones realm, he was dead set against having anyone even venture into his. Maybe the idea was a bit extreme. As annoying as the echoes were, they remained safely sheltered within the minds of children. There had to be another way to get answers. Besides, the echoes were convinced that there was a way to complete the trial. They just hadnt shared it with Dallion yet.

The next few hours were spent walking around aimlessly. Trying to light up the ground or use spells to have any clues appear proved useless. The challenge had reached a whole different level, and simple tricks would no longer work.

During the walk, Dallion saw the focus of everyones spells. Three quarters were of what everyone knew Dallion included were the same old basics they were forced to learn in class. Nearly all of them were utterly useless and had extremely limited practical usage. The remaining quarter of spells, though, were those that everyone learned on their own. Cheska was the greatest well of knowledge

of all fact she liked to display as often as possible. In addition to her barrier and protection spells, she was also the only person capable of opening portals to other realms.

Dallion tried to copy the portal spell, but three of the symbols were unknown to him, and drawing them turned out more complicated than he thought. It wasn't that he was lacking speed or magic, but rather the technique wasn't something that could be learned through observation alone.

Just twist your fingers as you do it, Cheska said, annoyed at his slow progress. It's just like tying a knot!

I bet you've never tied a knot in your life, Dallion grumbled. Why aren't any of you trying this?

Do we look stupid? Phoel smirked. I'm not trying that. I actually need my fingers.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion moved his fingers around, releasing magic as he did. Dozens of threads flowed through the air, creating the equivalent of a ribbon, as his fingers bent and twisted in ways they weren't supposed to. Cheska could do it in a far more elegant fashion, of course. In contrast, Dallion was doing his best to get his fingers to the spots indicated by the magic markers, just so he could complete the symbols sequence.

Whoever gave you fingers must have used clay, Cheska rolled her eyes. It's not even that difficult.

I need a break. Dallion let the magic on the tip of his fingers fizzle off. It was clear he was getting nowhere. Maybe after a while he'd try again. Raven, noticed anything familiar?

The realm is a lot smaller than it seems, Iksa said. The threads seem new and everything moves about as we walk, but I think we've been walking in circles.

Everyone stopped and looked around.

For how long? Raven asked.

I don't know. The girl shook her head.

It could have been hours, Raven mused.

But we've been walking for hours Phoel sounded confused.

That's what he means, Dallion said. We could have been walking in circles ever since we got here. That would make this realm the size of a room.

Cheska's fingers danced in the air. A spell formed, releasing a bird construct similar to an origami made of aether paper. The construct flew on towards the horizon. Everyone watched as it went further and further, disappearing beyond view.

Looks pretty normal to me. The girl to Iksa. Are you sure?

I know, I just feel it.

Dallion looked around. With his level of perception, he would have noticed if any sort of repeating pattern had emerged. The real question was, how much could his senses be trusted when in a place like this?

Ruby, any illusions in the area? he asked.

Don't know, the shardfly replied from his shoulder.

Guys, Ill try something. Dallion summoned his harpsisword. Cheska, create a few barriers around us.

A blob of curiosity the size of a watermelon formed within the girls torso. Casting with both hands, she surrounded the group with a variety of barriers, waiting to see what hed do.

At that point, Dallion did what everyone suspected he might: infuse his weapon with spark and perform a line attack. The thread of destruction sliced through Cheskas barriers, moving towards the distance. Then, moments later, it ripped through the air, creating a tear in reality itself. The effect lasted a few seconds, but it was enough to prove to everyone that they had been walking in a realm ten feet long.

Chapter 693: Realms within Realms

A hamster wheel, Dallion thought. Were stuck in a damned hamster wheel!

The concept was difficult to grasp, impossible even, until the group split in two, walking in different directions. Then, the flaws in the realm began to become obvious. While walking in their respective directions, there'd always be something that forced itself between the group: trees, hills, anything that would keep them from seeing each other. However, it was enough for someone in this case Dallion to fly up into the sky to find that the distance between groups remained less than a hundred feet. Just to confirm his suspicion, Dallion did another line attack and flew in the respective direction. The reality tear shifted like a crack on the inside of a bottle would the bottle rolled.

This is all part of the challenge, Raven said.

Yeah. Dallion descended back to the ground. And something I havent studied, thanks to mage Argus, he hissed. Are any of you familiar with magic realms and dimensions?

Dallion expected Cheska to be the one to show off with her knowledge. To his surprise, it was Iksa who raised her hand. Even back in class, she tended to be the quiet one to the point that Dallion had never considered her remotely special. Then again, he had made the same mistake about Phoel.

All realms are connected, she said. Not directly, but there are places which link to them. She paused, turning to Raven.

Go ahead. The black-haired waved his hand. He doesnt have an echo.

So, I was right, Dallion thought. All of them, indeed, had echoes and what was more, Raven had all but confirmed that they had the same echoes.

Every item realm is connected to the banishment realm, the girl continued. So is every city. When someone creates something, a guardian moves from that realm to the realm of the guardian. Normally only the Moons can do this. However, there are exceptions. She looked down.

Dallion felt a slight chill pass through his body. Could this be the reason that Raven insisted so much that he join the alliance? While Nil was correct that Dallion had a lot to offer, in terms of spell knowledge and abilities, he had only one thing that separated him from everyone else: the magic he was granted.

What exceptions? he asked.

Were in a magic realm. With the right spells and preparation, one can find the point that connects realms and follow them to the other side.

At least they werent going to sacrifice him. Dallion felt both relief and shame. There were many things he was worried about, but being threatened by a group of children wasnt even in his top ten. One could argue that it wasnt the children that he was afraid of, but their parents and the person whod given them their echoes, but even so it wasnt a fight he should be able to lose.

Okay, how do we find the connection spot?

The girl didnt answer.

Phoil, take them out, Raven said.

On cue, the large boy took out a stack of cards from his pocket. One could almost say that they seemed pretty standard. Dallion couldnt see any magic symbols on them, let alone spells. What he did see was them shimmering in the light of something that wasnt from this world.

They have items from other worlds,

Dallion noted.

Really? Nil sounded surprised. Thats peculiar. There arent supposed to be any.

Clearly, there are.

Thats not what I meant! the old echo snapped. What I meant to say is that they arent supposed to have them. The items that werent destroyed were locked up tight.

Dallion didnt argue, but in his mind he was wondering what if someone had restarted the previous archmages experiments. With so many mages from Earth, the temptation would be significant.

We follow the death of a guardian.

Phoil took the top card and tore it in two.

This wasnt the first time Dallion had seen items destroyed. He himself had broken items, killed plants and animals, even people. Never before had he killed something just to see where its departing guardian went. In some way, it was almost like looking at a creatures soul leaving its body so as to find the path to the spirit world. The most alarming thing was that in this case, it actually worked. For a split-second Dallion saw something shimmer out of the torn card. Immediately, he focused on it with his magic layer vision. The guardian was there, or at least a distorted version of it, floating through the air like a semi-transparent thread.

That way! Dallion almost shouted, pointing in the direction. Every instinct in him urged him to chase the guardian. Thankfully, all the wisdom and experience acquired as a hunter kept him from doing so.

The guardian thread continued to a point in the air, then suddenly vanished.

Very curious, Nil commented. That is a method that I hadnt considered.

Following the spirits of items?

Dont be so cynical, it doesnt suit you yet. I was referring to the items having a guardian in the first place. Items from other worlds dont have guardians within them. That is a trait reserved for this world.

Youre sure?

Quite. Maybe it doesnt seem like it, but I had a rather illustrious academic career. And not like those slobs who only saw the Academy as a place to sleep, drink, and discuss how superior they were to everyone else.

Considering what Nils original was like when Dallion first met him at the Icepicker guild, there was room for disagreement.

Did anyone else see it? Raven asked.

Not a thing. Phoil shook his head.

I saw something, but it was too fast, Cheska said. The cluster of blobs that had appeared on her left shoulder told Dallion that she was lying.

I saw it. Dallion pointed his harpsisword to the spot at which the guardian had vanished. It disappeared here.

Youre sure? Raven pressed.

Yes, Im sure. Its not like anyone can say otherwise. Clearly, I was the only one who saw it.

Its not about whos the best. There are multiple realms linked to this one. Thats the whole point. The trial starts off easy. Thats why the realm is so small: so our options are few. We can still mess up, though. If we enter the wrong realm, we might have to fight our way out.

And what if we enter the right realm? You think we wont fight? Its the Moons were talking about. This isnt some awakening trial, its

None of them have passed a personal awakening trial, Nil interrupted. Considering the Moons restrictions, they might not even have been told about them.

Dallion was nearly certain they had, but the echos point was adequate. Hed already been cursed by the Moons, it was best that he didnt add more mess-ups to the record.

Its what? Cheska asked.

A whole lot of trouble. The next part of the trial will be harder by definition. If we go to the banished realm, what chance do we stand of getting back? Theres been mages far better than anyone whos alive today and they havent made it out. Were just novices.

Total silence followed. The rest of the children stood, as if struck by lightning. None of them had even considered the possibility, likely because the echoes had avoided such logic. That was one of the greatest shortcomings of relying on echoesif given too much trust or power, they tended to influence the realm owner. Dallion had experienced that first hand back when he was with a limiting echo. There was a while when Nil also had nudged him in a certain direction more often than necessary, though that was before Harp and Dallions own echoes had filled the realm.

No one has died during this trial, Raven said at last. That means we can't get locked in the banished realm, either. What other option do we have?

How many portals can we open? Dallion asked.

Don't look at me. Cheska shrugged. I didn't get to learn that yet.

I thought you knew everything. Dallion could miss the opportunity for a quick verbal jab.

I'm just a prodigy. I'm not related to a mage.

That explained why Iksa was recruited.

I can make five, the girl said. Maybe ten.

Before Dallion could explain what he wanted her to do, another card was torn. The sound caught his attention. A new shimmering guardian thread emerged, only this time it went in a different direction. Dallion half expected that. In his mind, he could see various realms float around the one they were currently at. Chaotic, but with a principle that's what he was told at the mage village a while back. The woman's magic trait was a lot higher, of course, but that didn't matter. It was the principle that was important. Right now, it seemed that Dallion and the rest were locked in a realm without a clue. The truth was that there were clues everywhere. They just had to figure out how to see them.

Do five, Dallion said. And, Phoel, stop tearing up cards.

He's right, Raven agreed. We'll need them later.

There was a moment of tenseness, after which Phoel put away the deck of cards, and Iksa cast her spells.

Both the symbols and the pattern on which they had to be put on were beyond his current abilities. That didn't stop him from carefully observing for future reference. Once a spell was complete, a circular portal appeared, leading to another realm like a giant opening.

One portal done, Iksa continued. Two openings appeared, then three, then four, and finally five. Just as Dallion suspected, they moved about in random fashion, though never coming in contact with one another.

Dallion tried to see any difference between the realms using his layer vision, but there was nothing to see. The Moon realm guarded its secrets jealously.

Do I tear another card? Phoel glanced at Raven.

No, Dallion answered instead. You said that the right way will lead us closer to the Moon?

Closer is a relative term, the black-haired replied. But yes, we'll get closer.

And the Purple Moon is the essence of magic. Dallion reached out and let his magic stream out of his fingers. He had to be careful not to use up too much, or he'd faint, or worse. Most of the minuscule threads went in all directions, though one cluster shot at one of the portals.

The principle of magic is pulling, Dallion thought. It held true here as well.

It's there, he said.

You cant be sure.

No, but its better than relying on cards.

Raven hesitated.

You can play it safe all you want, but a choice must be made. A lot of planning has gone into preparing this, so itll be a while before theres time for another go.

Dallion knew that he couldnt use music skills to affect an echo, not a mage one, anyway. Still, he had some experience in high stakes politics to know that the closer one was to achieving a goal, the more difficult it was to let it all go to waste. No doubt the Moonstones were the prizesomething that only a novice could obtain. After all, it was never mentioned that the people who obtained the item couldnt give it to someone else.

Youll lead? the black-haired asked.

Isnt that why you invited me to this group?

No.

The honest reply astonished Dallion.

If the portal closes after you, youre on your own.

Thats harsh. Dallion frowned.

Iksas the only one who can open it. If she cant, well leave you behind and continue with the original plan.

There was an original plan? And no one told me? Sure.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion split into a dozen instances. Half of them stepped through the portal in question. After Dallion was satisfied that there were no hidden traps or ambushes on the other side, he ended his combat splitting and stepped in as well.

Chapter 694: A Half-broken Obelisk

The new realm seemed no different from the last. The stringy trees and cone-like mountains were everywhere, along with the faint presence of emotions somewhere in the distance. Creatures were part of the challenge, as was size.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion did his usual line attack with spark. Unlike before, it was quite a while since the thread of destruction managed to cause a tear in the realm; miles by the looks of it. That finding the right portal could no longer be achieved through the method they had used before.

Its safe, Dallion said to the portal behind him.

None of the others moved.

Seriously? He wanted to cross his arms, but letting go of the sword wasnt a wise choice right now.

How much do you want me to stay here before you come along?

Ten hours. Phoil laughed out.

Dallion almost expected Raven to add a few thoughts of his own, but the boy didn't. Instead, the noble cast a levitating spell, then directed himself through the portal. One by one, the rest followed. Cheska was the one who cast the levitation spells, getting Phoil through first, then herself. Iksha was last apparently the creator of the portal was the one manipulating the spell, so when she passed through the opening to the initial real, closed off, vanishing away.

Where are we? Phoil asked.

It's not the banished realm, Dallion said. It's inhabited, but I haven't seen by what. From experience, he knew that it wouldn't be friendly. My guess is that we must find the next realm connection point and move on.

The Earth side of him grumbled that there wasn't a formula that would help reduce all the trial and error. There were formulas regarding thread extraction from materials, after all, and basic rules when it came to spell composition. When it came to realms, though, formulas were strangely lacking. It was almost as Dallion was experiencing two different types of magic.

It won't be that simple. Raven's spell ended, causing him to land on the ground. The height was nothing to be sneezed at, but as an awakened, even a child could do it without issue. All we have is theories. It's not even certain how many realms we need to go through. I was counting that we'd take a shortcut through the banished realm.

That sounded like a really dumb idea, but Dallion didn't want to insult Raven and more importantly the puppets' originals.

Let's assume it's seven. The Moons like that. So, we're into two, which leaves five more to go.

The thought was overly optimistic, but no one argued. After some more discussions, it was decided that the best course of action was to explore the new realm and see what it had to offer in terms of clues. Out of precaution, Dallion asked Iksha whether she could mark the way to their previous realm. As it turned out, she already had. Raven had always considered the possibility they'd get lost, so he'd tasked Iksha to learn how to mark realms in addition to opening portals.

Unfortunately, her current level didn't allow her to mark a large number of realms, or she would have done so.

Despite Dallion's objections, Phoil tore a few more cards in an attempt to find the next path. The guardian threads flew in different directions, making it obvious that the banished realm was nowhere near.

Nil, is it true that all realms are connected? Dallion asked as they continued walking. Several square miles was quite a lot of distance, especially for children when they were crossing it on foot.

That's one of the great paradoxes, the old echo replied. On the one hand, most of them are through the real world. Items that are in contact with one another have their realms close by. That's the reason you can summon weapons that you are holding in the real world, providing they contain some special materials or are otherwise enchanted. It's one of the reasons the seven metals and similar

materials are so valued. The metals especially, since they are the easiest to form and shape.

I see. Everything is in the real world, so its connected to it in this fashion.

Again, thats not strictly true. Theres no direct contact with the banished realm, or the other worlds. At least not directly. Only the Moons can form a bridge between those. Naturally, there are scholars that claim that a link does exist somewhere in this world, possibly beyond the west ocean. Thats nonsense, of course. Not that it has stopped the Order from establishing monasteries in all sorts of forgotten places.

Right

On the other hand, when it comes to magic, it could be said that all realms are connected, yet only for those with the trait, Nil went on. From that perspective, all realms are connected, even if not directly.

Magic threads, Dallion thought.

Similar principle. Straight lines in magic realms are different from straight lines in non-magic realms. Thats how mages can summon objects that are thousands of miles away. However, while all realms are connected to each other, not all could be reached directly, unless youre a Moon. The echo let out a chuckle.

There was no denying that. The only things that seemed to restrict the Moons were their own restrictions.

Then, in order to reach the realm were supposed to, we must go through the correct realms? Dallion asked.

Possibly. Ive never taken part in such a challenge. Theres no guarantee that the realms youre going through are independent realms. For all we know, they might be a cluster of sub-realms that are part of the Moons realm. Things are very complicated on such a high level. When you become an apprentice, Ill tell you which books to look into if youre still interested in that field. Its rather fascinating, though not for everyone. Most tend to go for more practical things such as vortex location and advanced spelling, Nil added in disgust.

Stop! Phoil said all of a sudden. Whats that?

Dallion looked in the direction the boy was pointing. Hidden among the trees was something that resembled a large rock. For the most part, the object was covered up by the local excuse of flora, even so the anomaly was clearly visible: part of the rock had a straight edge, which wasnt supposed to exist in nature.

Good find, Dallion said, despite being angered that he hadnt been the one to spot it. With his level of perception, it should have been him to notice.

How come you didnt see it? Phoil smirked. Arent you the big hunter and all that?

Gritting his teeth, Dallion glared at the larger boy.

Shut up, he hissed and split into instances.

In one instance, he summoned his bladebow and used the kaleidervisto sights to check out the thing. The rock shined so bright that Dallion had the impression he was looking into the sun. Immediately, he jumped back to the rest of the group, letting all instances fade away.

Whats the matter? Cheska asked, seeing Dallion wince.

I dont know. Dallion rubbed his eyes. Even if it was only one instance that had experienced that, his eyes hurt just as much. Its not normal. Its bright. Give me a moment to check it out.

Cast some barriers, Raven ordered.

Dont, Dallion said. Dont cast any spells.

Waiting a few more moments for his eyes to readjust, Dallion split again. This time, his instances dashed through the patch of trees. It didnt take long for him to reach the rock. Of course, up close, the stone was no longer a rock, but the base of a structurean obelisk of some sort, to be precise. Thanks to his scholarly skills, Dallion was able to imagine the missing parts. When constructed, the monument had to be fifteen feet. Time hadnt dulled its edges, as if construction had just finished a few days ago. Before Dallion had a chance to look about for more remnants, his time was up. All instances vanished, leaving him back with the rest of his group.

Its some kind of monument, he said. Half of its destroyed, but the rest looks in good shape. Clearly made by someone.

Theres no one else here, Iksa looked at Raven.

Theres something, the black-haired replied. Right, Dal?

Yep. Dallion nodded. There are creatures in the realm, but theyre keeping their distance. Since we got here, theyve made sure to be in the opposite part of the realm.

Do you think they destroyed it? Cheska cackled her fingers.

Are they cracklings? Phoil leaned closer.

Cracklings dont exist in magic realms, Dallion said with a smug expression. Must be something else. Its possible that they destroyed it, or maybe it was someone like us during the previous trial.

Is it safe to approach? Raven asked.

Dallion shrugged. As much as anything. There werent any obvious traps, and nothing attacked me. Thats no guarantee, though. He summoned his harpsisword. I say we check it out. Its the only new thing here.

Given the boredom everyone had been subjected to in the last few hours, Dallion expected that everyone would jump at the opportunity. To his surprise, no one budged, remaining quiet, as if they were facing a monster guardian.

Okay, whats wrong?

How come you didnt notice it before? Raven asked. You have the best perception and experience.

I was thinking about something, Dallion said defensively. Phoil did.

Not on the first time, though. We've gone by this patch of trees before and no one saw anything.

On the surface, Dallion had every right to get angry at a bunch of ten-year-olds pointing out his mistakes. It took some effort to look beyond the obvious and listen to what the hidden echoes were saying. This wasn't meant as a criticism, but rather a warning. If the obelisk had been so obvious, it wouldn't have taken Dallion, or anyone of the group, up to now to see it. That suggested the monument hadn't simply hadn't been there. Something must have triggered it into existence, or made it visible, respectively.

Thinking back, Dallion tried to remember everything he had done since arriving here. His high memory trait helped a lot in that, though not completely. There were minute details he had missed, not to mention he couldn't give a hundred percent account of everyone else.

What do you think triggered it? He asked Nil.

Magic, I assume, the echo replied. And no, I don't think it was your magic personally.

What do you say? Dallion turned to Raven. Do we go there or we check out everything else first?

Everything else, the black-haired replied. If nothing happens, we'll check the obelisk.

The walking continued. Hours passed and yet the sun kept shining from the exact same spot it had before. The concept of day and night was absent in this realm, as was the weather, fortunately. Along the way, Dallion kept an eye for other ruins or stone pieces. The consistent lack of such only made him more sure that the obelisk was the riddle that would get them to the next realm. He voiced the idea several times, but all of them were ignored by Raven, who changed the topic.

Finally, when the entire realm was explored, and the environment started looping around itself, it was decided that there was no other choice. And yet, there was a huge sphere of fear in Raven's chest that had been consistently growing for the last hour.

Don't worry. Dallion smiled. I'll take care of the creatures.

I'm not worried about the creatures. Blobs of deceit appeared within Raven. After a few more seconds, Raven went off, making a sign for the rest to follow. Phoil was the first to do so, of course, followed shortly after by Cheska. Iksa, though, remained behind.

There aren't supposed to be obelisks, she said in a hushed voice. Not yet.

How do you know?

I'm the one who got the trial records from my grandfather's library.

The admission was surprising, but also further explained why the girl had been chosen for the group. It also raised new questions. If Raven wasn't the one with the knowledge, what was his role? And still, why was Phoil here?

According to half of the accounts of those that failed, it's said that they reached the obelisks, Iksa continued. In all the cases that happened after a few realms. The plan was to use the cards to find a way to avoid the obelisk realms.

Ominous, Dallion thought.

Itll be fine. Besides, we can always go back.

No, she shook her head. That option ended the moment you saw the obelisk. From here on, we must complete the trial the standard way.

Now Ravens mood shift became clear. Like most nobles he was hoping for a shortcut and how that it had slipped through his fingers he was scared, despite what the echoes were telling him.

Why are you telling me all this? Dallion asked.

Because one of my echoes said I should.

Chapter 695: The Obelisk Eaters

Dallions initial fear was that upon gathering near the obelisk, the group would be attacked by the ever-elusive creatures. That turned out not to be the case. The emotions he could sense with his music skills remained just as distant, even if they were markedly stronger.

The strange thing was that no one seemed to be doing anything remotely useful. Raven stood ten feet from the monument, observing it intensely. Phoil was sitting on the ground, playing with the shimmering deck of cards, and Cheska was idly practicing her spell casting, composing a nearly full pattern before letting it collapse. Even Iksa seemed deprived of any desire to do something.

Anyone seen anything of the sort? Dallion asked, testing the mood.

No one responded.

Okay, we can tell that its broken, Dallion went on. But at the same time, is there enough for us to cast spells on? Anyone know of any repair spells?

Theres no such thing as a repair spell, Phoil snickered. It wasnt the sort of reaction Dallion wanted, but given the lack of everything else, that would do as well.

Was I the only one who went through riddles during the experience trials? Dallion frowned.

I did a few, but they were boring, Cheska said.

I only got into fights, Phoil admitted.

Iksa? Dallion looked at the girl.

I she looked to the side. I got my level up through other means. Ive only been in two trials, both against guardians.

Now, do you see why youre so valuable, dear boy? Nil asked. Academics tend to get stumped by the most basic problems, while theyre devising formulas to take over the world.

That sounded just like what had happened here. The group, and the people supporting them, had been so convinced they could circumvent the standard trial that they werent prepared to deal with the actual problems. If it wasnt for the still penalty of failure, Dallion would have found the whole thing rather funny. Instead, it was starting to infuriate him.

Doing his best to remain calm, Dallion went next to Raven.

Any ideas? he whispered.

The obelisk is the key, the black-haired replied. Either we have to repair it or destroy whats left.

Yeah, that pretty much covers all options, Dallion couldnt let it slide. Any information on the matter will be useful right about now.

There are too many possibilities! The whole point was to avoid this step. When pillars are involved, nothing is certain. Sometimes the obelisks are guardians that need to be eliminated. Sometimes, they are markers leading the way. The only way to know for certain is by interacting, but if that turns out to be a trap

The trial will end here, Dallion finished for him. Ill combat split and check it out. Everyone else can

It wont work, Cheska interrupted. Theyre protected against splitting. If something happens to one instance, it will happen to all the rest.

That was expected. Dallions still intended to do it, though. Something about having a spare instance always made him feel somewhat more secure.

Does anyone else intend to do it? Dallion asked.

Phoil can do it, Cheska replied lazily.

Just stand back. Dallion tapped Raven on the shoulder.

Are you crazy?!

Were not completing the trial standing here, so what choice do we have?

Reluctantly, Raven had to agree. Without a word, he took several steps back. As if waiting for this, Cheska then completed a spell, casting a protective barrier between Dallion and the rest. Moments later, another barrier spell was completed, wrapping the whole area around the obeliskDallion included.

Real smooth, Dallion grumbled internally.

Summoning his harpsisword, he proceeded onwards. As he did, he split into three instances. One of them infused the weapon with spark. If this turned out to be a trap, he planned on destroying it even if he were made to suffer the consequences. It was one of the remaining two instances, though, that poked the base of the monument with the tip of the weapon. Nothing happened. At the very least, it wasnt affected by inanimate objects.

After a momentary pause, Dallion split into three new instances. Two of them kept their distance, while the third approached again, this time, letting magic through the harpsisword. A rune of light was drawn onto the stone side.

According to the statistics of probabilities, the chance of getting the correct symbol or combination of symbols on the first to go was virtually zero. In his mind, Dallion was already going through all other symbols that might make sense in a trial like this. To his astonishment, the obelisk lit up with the brightness he had seen through the kaleidevrismo a while ago.

Shield! Dallion jumped back, summoning the armadil shield.

The large piece of gear emerged on his hand. At Dallion's current size, the shield didn't need to expand to cover most of him. Even so, it expanded slightly to make sure that even his feet were protected.

Hold tight! Dallion shouted, getting ready to swing with his harpsisword.

However, no attack followed. Not only that, but the incandescent glow of the obelisk slowly faded away. Seeing his shadow on the ground diminish, then vanish completely, Dallion cautiously moved the shield away in one of his instances.

The monument was still there, but the blinding light had gone down to a warm purple glow. That wasn't the most important thing, though. Clusters of magic threads emerged from the broken part of the obelisk, heading up in all directions. Dallion was positive they weren't there moments ago.

The boy turned around and looked at the rest of his group. They were there, no less amazed.

You certainly know how to make an impression, the armadil shield said. Better look out when you become an apprentice.

Why? Think people will try to betray me?

Quite possibly, but that's not what I had in mind. Flashy mages tend to attract lots of friends and magic groupies, at least they did back in my time.

Ignoring him, Dallion focused on the threads again. Initially, he was overcome with the temptation to slice them off with a precise spark slash. Then a thought crossed his mind, one that simultaneously both thrilled and depressed him.

We need to find the missing pieces and rebuild it, he said.

Are you sure? Cheska asked. It might still be a trap.

If it's a trap, then we'll fail. Dallion grumbled. The reason the creatures in this realm have been hiding from us, instead of attacking, is because they have the missing pieces. It's a hunting trial. We must reach them, defeat them and bring the fragments back. Preferably before the obelisk stops glowing. The last, he added on his own accord. Having played enough games back on Earth, he still couldn't kick the feeling that anything glowing was a time indicator or sorts.

I don't know

Look, if they wanted to harm us, there's nothing you could do. The threads have already gone through your magic barrier.

That much was true. Considering it as criticism, Cheska immediately ended her spells. From her point of view, it was better that she be put in danger than admitting that her magic wasn't all-powerful. At the end of the day, she remained a child, despite being a prodigy.

Lux, lift me up, Dallion ordered.

The armadil disappeared, unsummoned, as the firebirds' flaming wings emerged from Dallion's back. It was hardly a polite thing to do, but Dallion felt he didn't have time to waste. Bursting into instances, he flew in all directions of the sky, following each thread to its final destination. Miles passed by in a flash. Within seconds, Dallion came to the end of his destination.

Species: AETHERFISH

Class: MAGIC

Health: 50%

Traits:

- **BODY: 0**
- **MIND: 20**
- **PERCEPTION: 20**
- **REACTION: 20**
- **MAGIC: 20**

Skills

- **GUARD**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **FLIGHT (Species Unique)**

Dozens of purple jellyfish were in the realm, each at the end of the thread. Looking closer, Dallion was able to see stone fragments within the creatures themselves. Within Dallions mind, time stopped.

It was so tempting to try to make echoes of himself and dispatch all the creatures at the same time. A series of spark slashes and everything would be over. Sadly, that wasnt in the cards. Dallion had to make a choice.

His high perception trait had helped him see the shape of all the stone fragments within the creatures; his memory trait to memorize them. Using his scholar skills, Dallion did a quick mental jigsaw to determine which jellyfish had the stone fragment that would fit the broken obelisk. Once he knew that, Dallion knew which instance to make reality.

All instances, but one vanished. Flying forward, Dallion infused his sword with spark and performed a vertical slash.

The blade cut through the jellyfish like butter, causing a huge chunk to fall off. However, no red rectangle appeared. At this point Dallion suspected that something was not right, so he continued striking using the multi-attack the skill bonus granted him.

Screeches filled the air, as jellyfish chunks flew in all directions. The creature tried its best to evade Dallion, following a defense pattern that was supposed to help it to evade a strike. However, that worked poorly against adequate combat splitting. Even with five instances, Dallion was able to ensure that each strike was a hit. Yet, that didnt seem to do anything at all. No matter how much he sliced off or how often, more would appear, as if the creature was constantly regenerating.

Come on! he hissed. His speed increased beyond what a normal person could see. The chunks of jellyfish turned into rain flying off it, but even that proved not enough.

Then, two thoughts hit Dallion at once. This was a magic trial. Defeating the enemy through combat alone wasn't the point. However, were he to use his blade to draw a burning symbol within the creature, or possibly create a fireball, could have the desired effect. That was one option the more straightforward and certain one.

The second option was to use a skill he had neglected for quite a while: talking to it. It was without doubt a creature, even if created by magic. That suggested that if he were to use his zoology skill, he might convince it to give him the chunk of stone. It would have been better to start with that option before attacking. Now, after causing it so much pain, it was all but certain that the creature would feel aggressive towards him.

There's no gain in trying that now, Dallion thought, as if to convince himself of the fact. And yet there was a small meager voice deep inside that insisted that he should try. This wasn't the voice that Dallion had become used to hearing. Rather, this was his own voice, remembering how he had done things a while back.

Is this why the Moons have cursed me? Dallion wondered.

Had it been necessary for him to become a monster in order to defeat the Star? He liked to believe that he hadn't become one; but even if he had, there had been no other way to achieve victory. There was no guarantee that the deal Aether would have made was going to be as good as the one given to him by the Purple Moon. The same was true here. The aetherfish could well forgive Dallion, but would it? With every second, it was looking less and less likely. Dallion had just to go on and finish it off, then maybe try to approach the other ones in a more peaceful manner.

Suddenly, his hand froze. The strike that was supposed to pierce the creature did not occur. Taking advantage the aetherfish pulled back, flying away as fast as its body would allow it.

You okay, boss? Lux asked. Why stop?

It's fine. Dallion unsummoned his sword. Take me close to it and match its speed.

Err, okay, boss. If that's what you want.

Dallion nodded. It was what he wanted. The bigger question was whether it wasn't too late.

Chapter 696: Magic Talker

Finding the proper words to apologize for a friendly fire attack was never easy, especially after doing a few hundred of them. Dallion kept on flying alongside the jellyfish, keeping his hands clearly in view. He had no idea how the creature was able to see, but given that it had a perception trait, it had its ways. Furthermore, the way it changed direction to deliberately avoid him only confirmed his suspicions.

Learning to communicate with it was no joke eater. In the past, Dallion had grasped animal languages by combining his zoology and scholar skills. Sounds, body movement, even smells were transformed into a series of symbols which he then deciphered, forming the basic means of communication. Since aetherfish was a new species, Dallion decided to take what he had learned from sea creatures as a basis. After a few minutes of observation, he finally decided to have a go.

Hello, he said, combining music, magic, and zoology.

Once the vibrations reached the surface of the creatures body, it suddenly paused. A huge blob of curiosity appeared, filling the aetherfishs body entirely. Apparently, curiosity in this realm was ridiculously high, even after receiving all those attacks.

Can you understand me? Dallion used his magic skill to add a bit more calm and understanding into the creature. The attempt was successful, though even those were thrown out by the massive curiosity it held.

You can speak, the creature noted in an echoy, its method of communication very similar to Harps.

Yes, I can speak. Dallion nodded out of habit. Sorry for hurting you a while back. I thought you were going to attack me.

Hurt? A small blob of confusion emerged within the atherfish.

This was an unexpected opportunity. Dallion could easily pretend that the attacks never happened. Alternatively, he could combat split in case that annoyed the creature. With a mind trait of 20, the creature risked seeing through the deception, though.

Didnt you feel pain up to now? Dallion focused on the aetherfishs point of confusion.

It was very annoying, and it stung, the creature agreed. Its good that you stopped.

The last sounded somewhat of a threat. Still, it didnt make sense. The attacks were real, Dallion used spark although, come to think of it, there never was a rectangle announcing the start of combat. Not only that, but the attacks didnt cause any damage, either. Dallion could see how from the point of view of the creature this wasnt a fight, but some jerk tearing up its clothes, in a manner of speaking.

I guess that when one doesnt have a body it doesnt get damage? He wondered.

Based on its skills, the creature wasnt able to attack either, just use spells, which it hadnt so far.

Yes, that was my mistake, Dallion continued along that line. His first reaction was to offer some of his magic to make up for the fact. However, quickly he remembered that was the fastest way to lose a magic level. For next time, though, he was going to make a habit of carrying a magic filled artifact to use instead. Truth is, I just wanted to get the piece of stone inside you.

Huh? The creatures confusion grew. Why would you want that? Sure, it looks tasty, but its bitter and impossible to digest. Id stay as far away from it as possible.

Yet another misconception. There was no telling whether this was orchestrated by the Purple Moon, or the creatures had really attacked the obelisk on instinct. Knowing the deities of the awakened world, Dallion assumed the latter.

They you dont mind giving it?

Cant. Been trying to spit it out for eternity, but its stuck. One of the others managed to get it out once, somehow, but even then it flew back in. Really nasty things.

Let me try. Dallion extended his hand towards the creature. Anyone else would have instinctively moved away, but the combination of creature naivety and Dallions advanced level of music convinced it to remain put.

Careful, dear boy, Nil warned. Even docile magic creatures could be dangerous.

Bringing his internal magic to his fingertips, Dallion grabbed hold of the thread connecting to the chunk of rock and gently pulled. The resistance was such that rock refused to move. So much for the principle of pulling. It was tempting to try and stick his hand into the aetherfish, but the thought that I might get stuck there too quickly made Dallion rethink his strategy.

The solution had to be simple. Using combat magic to melt the aetherfish off the prize, no doubt, was one option. Part of Dallion urged him to do just that and get it over with. The calmer him, though, decided to persist and find a better solution to the riddle.

Maybe the answer was to get the fish to swallow the monument base and have the pieces assemble within it. It was a crazy idea, but given everything else

Can you merge with other aetherfish? Dallion asked.

Of course. The creature replied. Cant you?

No. Dallion laughed. Im different.

Youre strange.

If all of you merge, maybe the pieces will merge together? You said that you cant get them out, but what if you get them all in?

Only someone twisted would come up with such a solution. In truth, Dallion doubted that the Moon had deliberately done so. Yet, as long as the rules of the realm were followed, there was nothing to prevent it from happening.

A cluster of hesitation blobs appeared within the aetherfish, but they were small and with a few kind and reassuring words, Dallion was able to make them fade away. Not much later, he and the aetherfish were flying through the sky on their way to try out the strangest experiment Dallion had had thought of. One would never guess that less than a minute ago Dallion was actively trying to kill the creature.

It didnt take long for them to reach the next aetherfish. Dallion had gone through his memories and chosen one, which had a chunk of the obelisk that would fit with the one they already had. Once that was decided, the creature cast a spell using its secondary tentacles and zipped through the air like a bullet. Thanks to Lux, Dallion followed soon after.

Without a doubt, it was lucky that Dallion hadnt irritated the creature to the point of using spells, because it was quite good at it.

Okay, Dallion said as both of them stopped. Ill explain the situation and

Before he could finish, the first aetherfish flew into the second, merging into one fifty percent larger. As all realm creatures, it didnt consider merging an issue or even a topic of discussion. That was good. What was even better was the sight of the obelisk chunks sticking to one another like magnets.

It worked. The large aetherfish sounded just as surprised as Dallion.

Yes! Great! Dallion felt a sudden rush of euphoria, one he hadnt felt for so long that he could barely remember. Thisll work.

Ill go to the

No! Dallion said quickly. Wait here! When I call you, just do as I say.

Sure. Once again, the creature was confused, but more than happy to oblige.

As for Dallion, though. That wasnt the case. Moments after the euphoria had appeared, it was quickly replaced by fearfear that the rest of the group might have done something rather rash. Unlike Dallion, they were adept in attack spells and just as likely to attack first and ask questions later, especially since they didnt have the skills to ask those questions.

Lux, get me back to the obelisk! Dallion ordered.

The firebird complied, ripping through the air at speeds that in the past had made Dallion vomit.

No sooner had Dallion arrived than he split into instances, ready to set off in all directions. However, he didnt have to. All four members of the group remained near the obelisk, just as they ahd been prior to his departure. What was more, none of them appeared to have any intention of setting off hunting creatures.

All but one of Dallions instances faded away. Youre still here? he asked in a forcefully calm voice. I thought youd be off hunting creatures

Yeah, right, Phoil laughed. Youre the hunter. Thats your job.

There was no way one wouldnt be angered by such a response, even if in this particular case Dallion was also glad that they hadnt. Clutching a fist, he counted to ten, then exhaled slowly.

Did you find any creatures? Cheska asked.

Yeah, I found them, Dallion replied. I also found an answer to the realms riddle.

Oh? Raven took a few steps in Dallions direction. Tell me.

Ill show you. Before that, have a barrier ready.

All four of the children looked at Dallion, then at each other. A barrier was soon cast, covering them like a transparent dome of light.

So far, so good,

Dallion thought. Now it was his turn.

Still in the air, he moved twenty feet from the obelisk. After some consideration, he retreated another twenty feet still.

You sure well be safe this close? Raven asked.

You'll be fine. Dallion waved at them. You've got a magic barrier.

His reassurance must have not gone down too well, for two more barriers emerged within it.

Dallion summoned his shield, then cast a volume spell. Back when he was learning spells at the Academy, this was one he had sought out specifically to make better use of his music skills. Now it was going to come into use in more ways than one.

Aetherfish, he shouted in their own tongue. The sounds were completely unintelligible to the rest of the group. For the creatures of the realm, though, they were the first instance of anyone addressing them. Curiosity emanated from all directions, telling Dallion that he had caught their attention. If you want to get rid of the rock chunks inside of you, you need to fly to the remains of the obelisk and merge into one. He added with as much calm and allure through his music skills as he could. Do that and the chunks will stick together.

Pausing for a moment, Dallion was about to continue with further explanations, when aetherish started to appear in the surrounding area like spaceships coming out of hyperspace. Even with his level of reaction, he was barely able to move back as the creatures merged with one another, growing in the process. A monstrous jellyfish of magic formed, the pieces of stone within its belly moving about like marbles in a washing machine.

Whoa, Dallion managed to say. He had seen a city be swallowed into the wilderness, dragons, the origins of the Star, even the world's mythical city of the distant past. Yet, there was something inexplicably beautiful in watching aetherfish merge as the solution of a riddle.

Within seconds, the entire tip of the obelisk was formed one large piece that would fit perfectly onto the base. However, it refused to budge from inside the creature it was in.

Go into the monument! Dallion shouted. Don't try to eat it or break it, just land on it!

Dozens of blobs of enthusiasm formed within the aetherfish, followed by it slamming into the ground, over the monument, Ravens group and all. Dallion himself had to pull back to be safe from the expanding magic jelly.

The obelisk piece turned around with the tip up, then slammed down, restoring the structure.

RIDDLE SOLVED

A huge red rectangle emerged. That was far from all, though. The obelisk lit up again, shooting up a single ray of light up to the sky. Magic streamed from the giant jellyfish, increasing its power to the point that it burned an opening through the aetherfish and reality itself, marking the path to the next realm.

That's it, Dallion thought. The solution.

The energy of the obelisk was so intense that it created a layer of heated air between it and the realm creature. As if waiting for that, the giant aetherish burst, breaking up into a shoal of aetherish that started swimming around the monument like fish in an aquarium.

MAGIC TALKER

(+2 Empathy)

There are more solutions to what is obvious. Its good that youve started to remember who you were. Dont forget that strength is still needed, though.

Well done, dear boy, Nil said. Two realms down!

Yes, two down But how many more to go?

Chapter 697: Guardian Obelisk

Being by the mass of a giant jellyfish even if within a barrier bubble hadnt gone well with the rest of the group. Now that it was over Dallion found it hilarious, but everyone else was quietly seething. Since the path to the next stage of the trial was clear, none of them voiced their thoughts, but they didnt have to the blobs of emotions were there for Dallion to see. Thankfully, since they were children, the emotion quickly faded away once something else was brought up to focus their attention. In this case, the something was the option to ride one of the smaller aetherfish to the new realm. Given that none other than Dallion had the option to fly, and even those who potentially knew the spells preferred not to use them, the alternative was instantly welcomed.

You sure itll be safe? Cheska asked, maintaining a magic barrier that allowed the group to stand on the top of the aetherfish.

Its fine, it's as thrilled as we are, Dallion replied.

That was an understatement. The creature had been so intrigued by Dallions antics, and the fact that he could actually talk, that had offered to join them on its own. Dallion still knew next to nothing regarding magic realm creatures. As Nil had pointed out, that was a field for apprentices, although he did share that for all intents and purposes they could be treated as beings from other worlds. The closest similar case was Skye, although it too was linked to an actual physical world. Dallion pushed to learn more, though the answer he received was so complicated, involving magic theories that made little sense, that he decided to leave it for another day, potentially in two or three years.

Your pet didnt fight, Raven said, looking at Ruby who remained attached to Dallions shoulder.

Thats because hes smart, Dallion said. He knows when theres no point in fighting.

Ruby flicked his wings once in confirmation.

Its your pet. Raven shrugged.

What do you know about the next realm?

Not much, the black-haired admitted. We were supposed to bypass the pillars. Still, they appeared too fast. In most of the accounts the challengers passed through several realms before finding them. We were lucky that we ended up with a riddle. Could have been a lot worse.

So, youve read the reports as well, Dallion thought.

Still, the noble did bring some good points. The riddle was quite forgiving, if nothing else. They could have remained in the realm for centuries and nothing but hunger and ambition would have pushed them forward. There were no traps, the creatures, though powerful, were docile with no interest in attacking first. Even the obelisk itself was inoffensive. For all practical purposes, it was almost as if it were a tutorial level.

Was there anything about the number of pillars in the reports?

You think I wouldn't have thought of that? Ravens voice hardened. There's no link between the number of pillars and what they do. There have been realms with twelve obelisks which presented a riddle, and realms with one that had to be defeated in order for the group to proceed. Every possible link between the accounts has been examined. There are too few of them left for anyone to come to any conclusion. At the end of the day, that's not the point of the trial. It's ingenuity. If memory was the key, it would be a mind trial.

Someone told me that there is no chaos in magic realms, just a lot of instructions as long as you know where to look.

That's only valid for apprentices onwards and the reason that they aren't allowed to take part! The black-haired snapped. Also, it doesn't apply for realms beyond the current one. It might work in a small realm, where every portal point is at arms length. In large realms you'll spend an eternity opening realms to read the instructions and Iksa doesn't have the strength.

Was that a slip? If Dallion understood things correctly, Raven knew exactly how strong Iksa was. No, not Raven, but the person behind him. The comment didn't bring any new information. Dallion already knew that the team was hand-picked with a specific goal in mind, but the way in which it was said made him suspect that at least one of the echoes knew Iksa very well. He wouldn't be surprised if the mage she was related to had put her up to this.

Flying into the next realm was only slightly weirder than expected. The best way to describe it was like flying towards a mirror and suddenly ending on the other side.

The moment the portal was crossed, Dallion's group found themselves in the sky of the new realm, facing down. One major difference was that gravity hadn't taken effect, preventing them from falling off.

Not in the least bothered, the archerfish turned around, positioning the horizon on the right side up.

Hold still for a moment, Dallion told the creature. Then summoned his hapsword and did a spark-infused line attack. The thin glowing line continued towards the distance, disappearing from view. This realm was a lot bigger than the last. For all Dallion knew it could be the size of a world realm.

Hills and forests were abundant, now also joined by the occasional mountain and large lake. There was no sign of a sea, at least as anyone could tell, but several large rivers and smaller streams. More importantly for the trial, a large obelisk, ten times larger than the one of the previous realm, was visible, standing alone in a large field.

At least we know where to start, Cheska said. Think it's a riddle like last time?

It's possible, but I doubt it. Dallion didn't unsummon his weapon.

Why?

This one is intact. That means nothing's dared to attack it. As far as he could tell, there were a number of creatures in this realm, some closer than others. A large part of their emotions were irrelevant, but there already were quite a few that included hostility and hunger, the same things that predators displayed when something new ventured into their domain.

Get the aetherfish to take us down a mile from the pillar, Raven said.

Ill do you one better. Ill tell it to take you down. Ill continue towards the obelisk and see what it does.

You dont have to

Hey, Im the hunter. Ill be fine.

Raven didnt seem overly pleased, but nodded all the same. He gave a sign to Phoel to tear three cards. The silent order was instantly obeyed and three guardian threads flew out, though this time all of them in the same direction. At that moment, time pretty much froze. The implications were obvious. There was a way to bypass the pillar part of the trial and head to the banished realm. Dallion was still opposed to the idea, but even he had to admit that finding a secret passage that could take them to the end of the trial was rather tempting. The bigger question was whether doing so would be worth it. They had already reached the third realm, which could be considered half the journey. If the archived accounts Raven and Iksa had dug up could be trusted, this could very well be the final realm they had to escape before completing the trial.

Its something to keep in mind, Raven voiced what was on everyones mind. We check out the pillar first. If things get too tough, we head for the banished realm.

What if the next realm isnt the end? Phoel asked.

Lets reach that point.

I really cant figure out the person behind Raven, Dallion said. Sometimes hes so impulsive and extreme, then hes calm and organized.

Youre assuming that only one echo is giving the orders, dear boy, Nil said. Its more likely that a group is involved, or even an entire faction. Remember, the Moonstones are a valuable resource. A lot of planning had gone into creating this. Whoever put it on motion had to wait for many pieces to become available before they could put the plan in motion.

Doesnt a faction have a single leader?

Depends on the faction. Also, theres no saying it isnt more than one faction. As I said, Moonstones are exquisitely rare.

Once the aetherfish reached twenty feet from the ground, everyone except Dallion leapt off. Dallion used the opportunity to cast a barrier spell of his own, letting him remain on top of the aetherfish. That caused a wave of disappointment from Lux, who was worried that he wasnt doing a good enough job. It took several reassurances from Dallion, and a grumble from Nox, to let the firebird calm down. Then, at last, the flight towards the pillar could take place.

What do you think it is? Cheska asked, amplifying the strength of her voice with a spell.

Thats what Im going to check out, Dallion replied in similar fashion.

Whats your guess?

I think its a riddle. Its too isolated to be anything else. Itll probably direct us to another part of the realm when activated and

Before Dallion could finish, the obelisk shattered in front of his very eyes. What was one monolithic whole exploded into hundreds of uniform blocks of rock. Then each of them sprouted legs and wings.

Species: SCARABISK

Class: MAGIC

Health: 100%

Traits

- **BODY 60**
- **MIND 20**
- **PERCEPTION 20**
- **REACTION 20**
- **MAGIC 20**

Skills

- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **SPELLCRAFT**

- **FLIGHT (Species Unique)**
- **WING SHIELD (Species Unique)**
- **WING SLICE (Species Unique)**

Weakness: UNDERBELLY

Do all the creatures here have spellcasting? Dallion leapt off the aetherfishs back as Lux took over his flight capabilities.

This is a magic real, dear boy, Nil said. What do you expect?

Before everyones eyes, the obelisk transformed into a swarm of scarab-like beetles, insisently making their way towards the group. The alarming thing was that the change had occurred well before Dallion had a chance to get near. That meant that the obelisk didnt feel threatened, but rather deliberately wanted to hunt them.

Doesnt look like youll be able to talk your way out of this one, Nil said.

Go back, Dallion told the aetherfish. Its dangerous here.

Dangerous? The creature asked.

In this realm the obelisks eat you, Dallion explained in a fashion that the aetherish could understand. The message had gone through since the large creature sped back.

Meanwhile, Cheska and Iksa were bracing themselves for the inevitable attack. Ravens emotional state was somewhere between concern and enthusiasm. As for Phoel, he remained perfectly calm.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion performed a standard line attack. The line split the air, crashing into the swarm of creatures. Before the strike could reach them, barrier spheres emerged around the creatures that were in danger. When the attack struck, all it did was push hundreds of feet back.

Keeping the initiative, Dallion did a spark line attack. This time, the results were better. Dozens of beetles broke like raw eggs, magic threads streaming into the air. If the numbers werent so much in their favor, Dallion could well try to consume their mana in the hopes of gaining a level or two. Maybe he still would further on.

Ill take out as many as I can, he shouted, ready to continue with his spark attacks.

Two more line attacks followed, but just as they did, the swarm dispersed, making each next strike less effective than the last.

Lux, get me to the rest, then come back as a bladebow, Dallion ordered.

Sure thing, boss!

In a flash, Dallion was thrust back and dropped on top of the barrier that Cheska had created. The flue flames enveloping him, then disappeared only to have the floating bladebow emerge and target the approaching creatures individually. The only issue was that while such attacks had proved devastating against cracklings and void creatures, the only thing they achieved here was to push the scarabisks back.

Oh well, Dallion thought as the fingers of his left hand moved to cast a spell. Its been a while since Ive fought against a swarm, anyway.

Chapter 698: A Mind behind the Swarm

Cheska and Iksa stood side by side, casting spells non-stop. Iska focused on the attack, sending magic projectiles at the constantly approaching scarabisks, while Cheska maintained the groups defenses, constantly putting up magic barriers at the right times at the right spots. Dallion took on a dual role: flying outside of the berries and destroying the creatures with spark attacksa task that seemed far more difficult than it seemed.

Back when he was a hunter, Dallion had fought more numerous opponents as well as more powerful ones. However, never had he faced creatures working as a whole such as these. It was almost as if they had echo rings of their own. Whenever one beetle came to a conclusion, a dozen more would instantly join it in proceeding with its attack, be it a series of spells, and attempt to encircle Dallion, or suddenly change direction. There was virtually no doubt that one major mind stood behind this, and the creatures were just expendable extensions.

Within minutes, things had gotten so bad that Dallion was forced to have Lux return to his firebird form and focus on healing him non-stop.

Lightning filled the air, surrounding the group like a giant dome. Any spell it touched instantly fizzled, causing dozens of stone insects to fall to the ground helplessly. As good as that was, it also momentarily disrupted all spells in the area on both sides.

What the heck, Raven? Dallion shouted, as two of his instances turned around. Give us a warning, will you?

Its not like I had much of a choice, the black-haired replied through gritted teeth. How many are left?

How the heck should I know?! Dallion snapped back. Two-hundred and fifty.

The numbers were far less impressive than during the initial wave. On the downside, the surviving insects were learning. Not only was it becoming more difficult to kill them with previously used attacks, but they were starting to cast more and more dangerous spells. If they wanted, they could have long won this battle by combining their efforts and creating a mega-spell with thousands of runes. The fact that they hadnt suggested that the trial was limited, or at the very least, this section of it was.

You should have saved that for later! Dallion continued. It wont work a second time.

Its good for a few more times. Raven didnt bat an eye. Phoil stood a few steps behind him and did absolutely nothing.

Were sitting ducks here! Cheska shouted. To win this, we must take the battle forward.

Now, while theres over a hundred, Raven shouted back.

Are you crazy?! Theres no way we can get them to a hundred!

Dallion had to agree. The swarms attack pattern was a lot more intricate than before. At any point, they only sent out a few dozen up close, the rest casting spells from a distance. Iksa was still able to take several of them out with a spell, but even she couldnt last forever. Dallion had noticed exhaustion starting to take hold and even a boost from his music skills wouldnt be able to let her keep up forever.

Using combat splitting, Dallion found the best location for a spark point attack, crushing ten more insects. The scarabisks cracked like hollow eggs, crumbling to the ground. It was a good attack, though unfortunately came at a price.

Up till now, the creatures werent able to cope with Dallions extraordinary number of instances, but with each successful attack they were starting to adapt. To some degree, Dallion suspected that every opportunity presented to him was a deliberate means to figure out his methods of attack. Sadly, it was working. What Dallion needed was to create more chaos in his behavior and that didnt come easy.

Two hundred, he shouted at Raven. Itll be too late afterwards.

You cant make it with two hundred!

We will! Dallion put in a lot of confidence in his voice. If we charge, the swarm will split in two. Ive seen it.

That was a lie, or at least mostly a lie. Dallion had only heard of such behavior from other hunters. He was inclined to believe them, but they were referring to standard prey. None of them had fought purely magic entities such as these.

Its this or nothing! Dallion added with a sense of urgency.

If he were dealing with the echoes alone, this probably wouldnt work. However, the fear of failure sparked within Ravens forehead. That was all Dallion needed to see.

Cheska, cast a barrier and rush forward.

Iksa can handle that. With the self-confident arrogance of a prodigy, the girl switched to casting an attack spell, launching dozens of magic projectiles that scattered, aimed at the nearest creatures. Only three of them hit their targets, but the current wave of swarm attacks was disrupted.

Always the show off, Dallion thought.

Meanwhile, he cast a fireball with his freehand then used his magic threads to grab hold of it and toss it at a scarabisk ten feet away. The flames dealt no damage, covering the defensive sphere around it. Yet, the spell was never meant to deal damage, but block its sight for long enough for he could split it in two with a vertical slash.

Normally Dallion could be pleased with the outcome. Right now, though, he found the method far too slow.

Dal, Cheska shouted from below. Remember what I told you about multicasting?

That was more than enough advanced warning. The girls fingers quickly moved through the air, drawing the spell outline while simultaneously placing symbols within it. As she did, markers emerged, indicating spots in which Dallion was expected to help out.

Lux! Dallion ordered, aiming to close to Cheska before the spell she was casting faded away.

As complicated as the whole process was from his perspective, it was nothing more than a paint-by-numbers experience. Cheska was using his skill to focus on the symbols that needed to be drawn, and their exact position. Dallions task was to fill them out as quickly as possible, while merging his own magic threads with those of the spell frame.

The spell they were aiming at was a double five circle composition. Most of the symbols were familiar, but there were two completely unknown, which was enough to make the total effects of the spell a complete mystery to Dallion.

The moment the final symbols were filled in, the circles shrunk, causing the spell to collapse on itself, then explode in a cluster of aether chains.

CO-CASTING NOVICE

(+2 Reaction)

Co-casting is a good way to create complex spells for half the time. It also makes the casters twice as likely to be hit.

Unlike with most of Dallions previous achievements, a second blue rectangle also appeared close to Cheska. It was unusual for it to count now, since it hadnt during the grand spell facing the entrance guardian. Then again, an achievement was an achievement. It was a pity that achievements didnt increase magic, though; other than killing a Star or its echo, that was.

The aether chains darted in all directions, snatching a target each.

Were not done! Cheska said, already starting a second spell.

A new set of magic markers emerged. Dallion filled them in without question. Upon finishing, the pattern transformed into purple electricity that ran along the chains.

FATAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 500%

Scarabisks fell to the ground like hail. There were no more than fifteen of them, but Dallion felt there were so many more. Just for good measure, he sliced any in vicinity as he and Cheska proceeded forward.

In his mind, Dallion focused on one of the new symbols of the chain spell. It was no more difficult than some of the ones hed already learned.

While flying, Dallions left-hand fingers moved about, releasing some of his magic to create the symbol. It was a quick series of actions, far too fast for the non-awakeneds eye. The first two attempts failed, but the third one succeeded.

The moment he created the symbol, Dallion instantly learned its meaning: it was the symbol of multiplication. This had to be the way in which the chain link had been multiplied hundreds of times, creating a chain extending hundreds of feet. Quite a useful symbol to know, especially for this task. Someone must have told the girl exactly what to focus on.

Stop slacking! Cheska snapped. We've got more to cast!

If we use it too much, theyll figure out a way to evade it.

Who cares? We just need to run past them!

That appeared to be the goal, but it somehow seemed too simple. If the obelisk acted as a guardian, it was certain there would be more of them further on. Killing it through attrition was one method, but Dallion would feel a lot calmer if they figured out how to deal with the obelisks faster. There was no guarantee that such a method was possible, but he was willing to try.

Alright, Dallion said, then split into a hundred instances without telling the girl. Ten remained close, flying slow enough so they could co-cast again. The rest, though, thrust forward towards the spot where the obelisk had been. A few seconds later, they faded out.

Dallion split again. This time also looking behind him. Iksa and Raven were handling things pretty well. The black-haired was abusing his debilitating spell. Thankfully, the creatures didnt seem to have found a suitable counter to it.

Another chain spell was cast, followed by another lightning bolt. Red rectangles filled the air, as another dozen of scarabisks were affected. In response, the creatures cast their own series of spells which were very similar to the ones that had been used on them. While the chain spell, thankfully, proved too difficult for them to master, the lightning bolt didnt.

Hundreds of lightning bolts his the ground, in one of the most beautiful and horrifying scenes Dallion had seen. Several hit some of his instances, incinerating them on the spot.

Watch out! Dallion pulled Cheska from the ground, just as a lightning bolt struck the spot she had been in. A split second later, the barrier she had cast materialized, enveloping both of them in a sphere of energy.

What was that for?! the girl shouted. I had it under control!

No, you didnt, Dallion said to himself. Your spell came late.

It was too close to tell, he lied. And how come theyve learned your spell this fast?

Spell copying is a thing. Youll learn that when you reach advanced spelling.

If its a thing, why teach them spells?!

Take it easy, will you? I know hundreds of spells. Itll take them ages to learn them all. Well be done by then.

The typical mistake of the rookie. There was a time when Dallion behaved in the same way. Back when he was exploring realms with March or Vend, hed constantly wonder why everyone insisted on defeating enemies using the most basic of skills. Hed learned a lot since then; he knew that information was the greatest weapon when it came to winning fights and the more they showed their hand, the more difficult it was going to become later on.

Youre not exactly hiding your strength either, dear boy, Nil remarked.

Dallion ignored him. Cheska had already started a new spell, even within the protective bubble. He had no choice but to join in, while also sending instances to investigate potential weak spots. In the process, he saw a pattern emerge: all instances that neared a specific point got attacked with surprising severity. It didnt take much imagination to figure out that the swarm was doing everything possible to keep Dallion from getting anywhere near the original point of the monument.

Two things instantly came to mind: one, there was a significant chance that the mind behind the swarm was there; and two there was a simple way to defeat it using magic.

Chapter 699: Obelisk Down

Aether chains flew in all directions. This time, a mere three scarabisks were caught by the spell. It was outright scary how fast the creatures had found the spells weakness. While their initial attempts to destroy the chains had failed, the new approach of summoning chunks of stone in immediate proximity created more than an adequate decoy.

The summoning had reminded Dallion of the ingot bombardment he had done when fighting the guardian of his Vermillion ring. All that was needed for that was Lux and the ability to summon. Unfortunately, the realm didnt allow Dallion to get ingots as he could in his own realm.

Next time Dallion would definitely consider recreating that effect with spells. For the moment, though, he had another idea.

Hold tight, Ruby. Dallion drew the symbol of multiplication on the creature. For a split second, shardfly copies erupted from him like confetti, fading away just as fast. It seemed that even here, a single symbol wasnt enough. However, there were things that werent.

In Dallions mind, time froze. He visualized the outline of a spell: a simple magic circle within nothingness. Then he added the multiplication symbol to it. This was enough to duplicate

everything within the circle. Since Dallion didnt want to have his duplication spell duplicate itself, he moved the symbol outside, connecting it to the circle with a single magic thread. Instead, a copy symbol every novices favorite was placed within, along with a matter and a speed symbol.

The complete spell was sloppy. If he had tried to do that in spelling class, the mage would have shouted his head off. Despite that, everything seemed in order, suggesting that the spell should work. Naturally, Dallion wasnt taking a chance with Ruby, so he split into instances to test it out.

A torrent of shardflies emerged and this time they lasted more than a minute.

This was the first time Dallion had successfully managed to clone a creature. Now all he had to do was order the flurry to attack.

Go get them! he ordered.

Waves of wind attacks flew in the direction of the scarabisks as the wave of shardflies went forward. Ruby was also among them; though he was quickly grabbed by Dallion and placed back in his usual spot.

Not you, Dallion whispered. Ill need you for later.

Nice, Cheska said a short distance away. A ball of envy had appeared within her almost as large as the infatuation that followed.

Its just a distraction. Dallion cast a few more copy spells, sending off the flurries to attack as well. Follow me, he changed direction slightly.

Where are we going?

I need to test something. Dallion gritted his teeth. So far, in all of his instances, only two had managed to reach the obelisk point. Surround us with barriers. As many as you can make.

Without argument, Cheskas fingers danced in the air. A pair of glowing spheres appeared around them, followed by two more. The spell was considerably more advanced than Dallions. For one thing, it regulated the lower part of the spheres so as to constantly touch the ground, but without digging in.

Initially, the defense seemed a bit over-the-top. When getting within a hundred feet of their destination, though, lightning and aether projectiles rained from the sky upon them.

More barriers! Dallion shouted as the first two layers collapsed under the combined attack.

Cheska was already ahead of him, increasing the total number of barriers to eight. In all instances, the barriers collapsed almost as fast as they were created. Even with the shardflies distracting a large part of the creatures, the intensity of the attack kept on increasing. At this point, Dallion split again, striking the ground with his harpsisword.

In all but three of his instances, nothing happened. In the remaining three cases a shock of magic current hit him, vaporizing the instances and all their gear. He had found the spot.

Cheska, Dallion turned to her. Ill crash through the barrier. When I do, I want you to cocoon yourself with as many shields as you can make. Keep them coming until its obvious youre safe.

What? Why?

Juist do it! Dallion used his music skills to add a sense of urgency to his words.

The girl nodded, starting the new set of spells. Once Dan happened, Dallion infused his harpsisword with spark and dashed towards the inside of the barrier. A few precise slashes and the glowing sphere shattered. Attacked from outside and within, the barriers shattered, leaving him completely vulnerable. Behind him, Cheska had already surrounded herself with so many new spheres that she was no longer visible.

Good, Dallion thought.

Lux, higher, he said, directing the firebird just above the theoretical weak spot. Please still be there. Dallion did a point attack straight down.

Dirt erupted like a geyser.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Damage dealt has been increased 1000%

A red rectangle emerged. The whole ground shook violently for several moments. Then, scarakisks began falling from the air, their magic glow gone.

For a fraction of a second Dallion thought that he saw threads of magic go from the creatures to the point in the ground he had struck, but it happened too fast to tell for certain. The only thing clear was that the group had survived their first challenge in this realm.

Thank the Moons, Dallion let out a sigh of relief. This had been a bit too close for his liking.

I think you did rather well, dear boy, Nil said. Mistakes were made, but at least you defeated it in the end.

Im not even sure what I defeated.

The flaming blue wings faded away, letting Dallion fall to the ground. The first thing he did was go to the large crater that had formed in search of any clue as to the creature there. Even with all his skills and traits, there was nothing he could tell other than the being was rather large, though incapable of combat.

That was some serious noise, Cheska approached. What spell did you use?

No spell, Dallion said.

The girl didnt believe him, but nodded nonetheless.

The foundation of the obelisk must act like the brain. Its controlling the swarm. Did you see any magic threads when it died? he turned to the girl.

I was a bit busy casting spells to see anything. She crossed her arms. So, no, I didnt.

Dallion tried to use his magic layer vision, but all he saw was the general magic of the realm and the many threads that composed the ground. There was no way to confirm his suspicion, and as logical as it seemed, it was dangerous to jump to conclusions.

After a while, the rest of the group joined in. Of the three of them, only Iksa seemed exhausted. Raven was back to being calm and collected, and just a bit pensive.

Anything wrong? Dallion asked. We won.

Thats the problem, the black-haired said. We won and nothing happened.

Thinking about it, that was true. Normally, a victory would be followed by a notification. The fact that there was none, not even a direct acknowledgement of the obelisks destruction, suggested that the event was insignificant when it came to the trial at hand. If so, one might expect more creatures of the sort and even stronger ones.

Now you see why we must ignore obelisks.

I take it youll go with your original plan? Dallion asked.

Im thinking about it.

Dont. If we cant defeat a creature in a controlled environment, what chance do we have to do anything in the banished realm.

Thats completely different! Well be protected.

Another omission Dallion only learned of now.

Nil? Is that true?

Theoretically, the echo said. The Moons are the only ones that keep the banished from entering the real world or even the realms. If not, the powerful ones would have found a way long ago.

Unfortunately, that had already happened. Dallion knew of one who had managed to escape his banishment, although there was no telling whether it had been with the Moons knowledge or not. Aspan was supposed to be locked up in his realm and yet still had managed to somehow reach Hannahs inn. It was possible that hed received help; maybe even the Star had tried to use him for his own devices, but had messed up. Next time Dallion got back to Nerosal, he was going to make a point to ask.

Based on that principle, it is believed that every part of the real world is also protected from the beings in the banished realm, Nil went on. So, even if someone were to enter and be among the monsters of the past, they would remain safe due to the Moons protection.

Moonstones or no Moonstones, once the trial was over, Dallion had a pretty good idea who his next target would be. It was quite clever using children to get him involved. No doubt the people behind this saw Dallion as a useful tool. More importantly, they also saw him as someone who could be sacrificed. Even if everything Nil had theorized turned out to be true, that was valid only for the rest of the group. Dallion had passed the fourth gate, which meant he was no longer subject to the Moons protection. If they ever entered the banished realm, he was going to be a valid target, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Ill see this through, he said firmly. You can try to use the shortcut if you want to.

The response sent shockwaves through the rest of the group. Dallion could see fear, anger, and panic flare up within each of them with a few seconds delay. No doubt the echoes had explained what was at stake and the degree to which Dallion was still necessary.

Dont be childish, Raven hissed.

Im being practical. Dallion put in a lot of effort to remain calm. Each part of the trial is a hint of what to expect next. The first realm showed us how to travel to realms. The first obelisk showed us that all parts of the obelisk are connected to its roots by magic threads. And this victory just now showed us how to defeat the defense obelisks.

What about the direction?

The question had the effect of an ice-cold shower. Raven was right. The first obelisk had shown them the way. This one might have done so if Dallion hadnt destroyed its brain. That had to be the choice: defeat the insects and the brain would reveal the way, or destroy the brain and kill off all the insects.

I guess well do it the old-fashioned way?

There was a long moment of silence. Everyone watched the silent confrontation between Raven and Dallion, unwilling to say a word. It was clear Raven was the leader of the group, but at the same time Dallion was the strongest beyond question.

Ok, we do it your way, Raven said at last. For now. He raised a finger. If things get too difficult, were heading to the banished realm.

Everyone was expecting Dallion to agree with the condition, but he chose not to respond. Already aware that he was important enough, he could afford to take on the role of a jerk.

How do we find the direction?

Taking a deep breath, Dallion released a bit of his magic through his fingers. Slowly he turned on the spot, observing the minuscule threads of magic, waiting for a slight tug upon facing the correct direction. No such thing happened.

That way, he lied, pointing in the direction they already were headed before the combat encounter.

Are you sure? Phoil scratched his eyebrow.

As much as I can be.

We need to rest first, Raven said. The fight took a lot out of Iksa.

Sure, but why not rest while traveling? Dallion cast a sound amplification spell and called out for the aetherfish.

Surely enough, the creature popped up in the sky right above them, then slowly descended to the ground. At least that was someone who Dallion could rely on.

Chapter 700: Purple Crystal Obelisk

It turned out that Dallion was lucky, at least when it came to the direction. Using combat splitting, he gave Lux instructions to fly in dozens of directions, then return in precisely two seconds. Since the firebird didnt have anyone to worry about, it managed to do just that and told Dallion of a series

of obelisks further ahead. From what Dallion understood, there was a whole cluster of themfour, at the very least.

After over an hour of cautious flying, the obelisks became visible to the naked eyeDallions, at least. At that point, things got really interesting.

Stop, he told the aetherfish.

Theres six of them, he said. About a hundred feet apart.

The way they were in position each protected the brain of the rest, making a quick win impossible. Trying to talk the creatures out of it was also impossible. Unlike the jellyfish, they were here for an exact purpose and that was to stop any novices aiming to pass the challenge.

Whats beyond that? Raven asked.

Ive no idea. Splitting doesnt let me get that far.

That was a lie. Lux had tried flying through or above the cluster, but each time, the obelisks had reacted. Either they would break up into swarms of insects, or cast a lighting blast at him from the ground. The result was the same.

Well have to fight our way through.

Thats the plan? Phoilo scoffed. We barely survived one of those things. Theres no way we can fight six.

Its not like you did anything, Dallion grumbled mentally.

Unfortunately, the large boy was right. With such a number difference, the swarms could defeat them using brute force alone. Technically, Dallions use of spark was a cheat. Ordinary novices werent supposed to have that. It was also highly questionable that ordinary novices would have access to some of the complex spells that the echoes had taught the group.

Cant you use your shardfly spell? Cheska turned to Dallion. Theres four of us. If we throw enough at them, well win.

That was used for distraction, Dallion said. Besides, theyve seen it before, so will have a counter. Theyve also seen your chain spell. He added with a note of disapproval.

All eyes fell on Raven.

We could use the cards, Iksa suggested. Just like we planned. We dont have to fight

No, the black-haired said firmly. This might be the final realm.

You said that the number of obelisks didnt matter. Dallion crossed his arms.

Its not the number, but the layers. We defeated one, then we came across a cluster of others. If this is the final realm of the trial, the final one will be after. If we reach it, then the trial will be over.

Thats not how the mage described it.

The heart is not the end of the realm. It leads to the place we must go. All fighting will be done here. The last part is a riddle.

A combination of riddles and combat. It sounded logical, and yet Dallion felt that Raven was hiding something. Worse, he feared that the echoes were hiding things from Rave, only telling him what he needed to know bit by bit. The boy was probably aware of the general outline, if even that. All specifics were spoon-fed to him as the group went on.

Theres an easy way to confirm it, Dallion said after a while. You said there must be one pain obelisk beyond this, right? Describe it to me.

If all of us cant manage to get through the pillars, why do you think you can? Raved stared at him.

Theres a way I can manage. Its not pleasant and it might now work, but Im willing to try.

Youre hiding things.

Of course I am. Dallion smiled. So are you.

Getting into arguments isnt the way to win anyone over, dear boy, Nil said.

Its too late for that, Dallion replied. This way, at least I might get some actual information.

What did I tell you about making enemies?

Results are all that matter. If we get the Moonstones, all we be forgiven. If we dont, Ill be blamed even if Ive been nice all the time.

Dallion summoned his armadil shield.

Youll try rushing through with that? Cheska blinked.

Thats the beauty of combat splitting, Dallion replied. If I fail, no one will ever find out. So, Raven, what will it be?

Well trust you on this. The black-haired nodded. The key one should be taller, made entirely of purple crystal just like the magic cubes. If thats there, youll know its the right one.

Okay. Dallion looked into the distance. If its not there, Ill come back and then well decide what to do. If its there, Ill rely on you to fight your way to me.

No one objected. Ironically, Dallion would have preferred if someone had. Asking the aetherfish to move closer to the ground, Dallion jumped off. The rest of the group soon followed, leaving the aether creature rather disappointed. Despite the fight it had witnessed, it was still very eager to see what Dallion would do. In the end, it agreed to remain a safe distance away and let Dallion proceed with his plan.

You could use the help, the admadil shield said. Those creatures are sturdier than you think.

Cocoon me, Dallion ignored the guardian.

The shield extended, forming a metal sphere. Before it was complete, Lux flew out, wrapping the outside in flames. From then on the plan was simple: the firebird would propel the ball between the obelisks and towards the central pillar, if it existed. It was all a matter of speed. Dallion doubted that

the shield could withstand the swarms magic attacks, even with Luxs help. He was relying on passing through before the swarm could emerge.

Ready? he prepared mentally. Then split into ten instances. In nine of them, he added Go.

The acceleration was immense, pressing Dallion against the inside of the shield. There was a time when such an action might have cracked a few ribs, or worse. With the current value of his body trait, it was little more than an inconvenience.

How is it? he asked after a few seconds. Did we stir them up?

Oh, we stirred them up, alright; the shield replied. I think you should take a look.

Show me. Dallion stretched the length of his combat splitting for as much as he could.

The sphere cracked open. As anyone would put it there was good news and bad news. The good news was that the crystal obelisk that Raven had described was there, a few miles ahead. The not so good news was that there was a shoal of quite large and carnivorous looking fish swimming around it. Given the capabilities of the scarabisks, Dallion had no doubt that these would be a lot tougher.

However, the surprises didnt end there. Turning around, Dallion saw a wall of dusk in the distance. Looking closely, it became clear that it wasnt dusk, but thousands upon thousands of scarabisks. Passing by the obelisks had disturbed them, but unlike before, theyd closed off the area instead of fighting outright.

There was only a moment left for Dallion to make a decision: did he choose an instance that had gone within the circle of insects, or remain outside and share what he had seen. The ego within him decided to remain. A moment later, all other instances were gone.

Brave choice, the shield said. You wont face the rock scarabs, but a bunch of killer whales instead.

Its all part of the trial. The guard obelisks had let him in, so there had to be a way to be able to get past the fish.

Other than a dragon, the only creature of similar size Dallion had seen was the vine whale back in the sword world item. These were going to be a lot more difficult to handle. Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

While he stood, the firebird leaped off the surface of the shield back on Dallion.

What do you think, Lux? Dallion asked. Should I have a chat with them?

Good idea, boss! The firebird chirped in response.

Good thing youre around. Dallion smiled. Going with such an approach was a terrible idea, though one he couldnt ignore. At the very least, hed get an idea how the creatures would react.

Splitting, an instance of Dallion flew straight at the whales. The more he approached, the more impressed he was with their size. If left alone in the wilderness, such a creature could crush small towns. Even cities would have a hard time fighting them all off.

Three quarters of the distance there, one of the creatures saw him. With a single brisk action, it turned to face Dallion. Cracks spread throughout the entire ground surrounding the obelisk. This wasn't an instance of reality, but the real thing occurring in all of Dallion's instances. Purple earth and rock collapsed, and as it did, dozens more whales emerged from the surface. Several rushed towards Dallion's instances, as if they were bait on the end of a fisherman's hook.

COMBAT INITIATED

Crap! Dallion quickly collapsed, all instances but the furthest away. He had definitely not expected this.

Half a hundred monsters were rising to the sky, filling up the space all the way to the wall of insects. If Dallion had to guess, he'd say that there were several more clusters encircling the crystal obelisk.

Avoid anything big! Dallion ordered, summoning his harpsisword. And don't go towards the insects!

A spark infused like attack flew in the direction of the nearest whale. The only thing it did upon striking it was push the monstrous creature a few dozen feet back without even leaving a mark. At first Dallion couldn't understand why. When focusing his layer vision on a whale, he saw that the scales weren't in fact scales, but thousands of small magic barriers, covering the creature in a suit of impenetrable armor.

Illusions, Ruby said, flicking his wings.

Where?

I don't know. Everywhere.

Astreza, Berannah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea, Dallion recited the names of the Moons. His adrenalin had spiked, but the experience gained as a hunter had taught him that he needed to remain calm. No matter the threat, worrying wasn't going to help.

Two whales clashed less than twenty feet from him. Each of the monsters had the intention of eating him, and each wasn't willing to let the other have its way. Dallion took advantage of that to have Lux fly him past them to one of the relatively safe spots in the area.

For all intents and purposes, it was as if he were in an aquarium full of piranhas. From this moment on, nothing was safe. Then again, that also meant that he could freely go to the obelisk itself without worrying what would happen. Just as he was about to, a stream of miniature jellyfish emerged a short distance away, making its way towards Dallion. The way the creatures moved was peculiar: instead of flying through the air, as everything else apparently did, they teleported in short bursts, disappearing and reappearing dozens of feet away.

Just great, Dallion thought.

There was only one entity whose being was filled with curiosity to such an extent even if that entity had somehow become a group of thumb-sized jellyfish.

Lux, get me to the tip of the obelisk! Dallion did a point attack, pushing back a whale that had gotten dangerously close.

This time, the whale didn't let the attack go unpunished. Dozens of its scales flickered, Magic symbols appeared within them, combining in one single spell. Looking closer, Dallion was able to discern its nature. The spell was, in fact, a simple one, repeated over and over; the main symbols were summon, force, and water.

Shield, cocoon both of us!

Barely had Dallion managed to say so when a tsunami was brought into existence, crashing onto him.