

Leveling up 771

Chapter 771: Real World Colossus

Have you ever seen anything like that? Dallion flew further up.

The creature was miles tall, rising like a small mountain in the middle of the wilderness. If it were any closer to a settlement, the Order, the Academy, and the emperor himself would have sent troops to stop it.

Its just a matter of size, Dallion thought. The bigger they are, the louder they fall.

He was confident that he had what it took to fight the creature, and yet his mind still rebelled against its mere existence. There was no way the Azures were responsible for this. If they could create such creatures, they would have already done so many times.

The cone of void mater wiggled on the colossus head, like a single hair on a bald scalp. While there was little doubt the chainling had caused the mountain to emerge, it wasnt certain that destroying it would kill the being as well.

The colossus took a step forward, moving away from the giant hole in the ground. Looking at it, Dallion couldnt help but think of Ogres Gorge near Dherma. According to the local legend, the place had been the battlefield of giants. Apparently, the legend was more literal than anyone could imagine.

No, the harpsisword replied. Ive only read about them.

Even that was a lot more than Dallion could say.

How do you kill it?

The same way you kill anything by attacking.

Dallion allowed himself a smile. The guardian could have told him to flee. There was no way the mountain could reach him. Even if it threw boulders, there were more than a few ways to avoid the attacks. Doing so, though, would make it someone elses problem. What was more, Dallion wanted to test himself against something this size.

Taking a deep breath, he did a series of double point attacks aimed at the colossus head. Of all the attacks he had, this was the only one that had a chance of succeeding.

Reacting faster than its size made possible, the mountain blocked the attacks with its hands. Chunks of rocks the size of a castle chipped off at every hit, crumbling to the ground below. And yet, the attacks didnt manage to pierce through, let alone deal any damage to the beings head.

Use the Moonstone, Vihrogon suggested from Dallions domain. The ray should be able to melt through.

Not yet. The Moonstone was a single-use item. Even if it could destroy what it was supposed to, using it now would be a pointless waste. There was no telling how many other colossuses could emerge. In contrast, there were only a few enemy battle mages. Ill find an alternative.

I know youll try. Keep in mind that you dont have to. Youve proven you can take on chainlings. That should be enough.

Not good enough. Besides, I know its weakness. Dallion cast a duplication spell, creating dozens of copies of himself. Ill go for the ears.

A swarm of Dallions split up, flying towards the massive creature along different paths. Flying among the rest, the real Dallion split into instances, heading straight forward.

Before he could halve the distance, the colossus swung his arms as if chasing a fly. A strong torrent of wind pushed all of Dallions copies back.

So much for that distraction, he thought. His enemy wasnt only large and fast, but smart. Using simple tricks wasnt going to work. Remembering back to Dallions previous fights, he had used every skill bonus to his advantage. His current magic abilities were far superior to a lot of those bonuses, except for one: time freeze.

Even in the real world guard skills would provide a huge advantage against this type of opponent. The only issue was how to get close enough to actually avoid its attacks.

Striking with his harpsisword, Dallion performed a spark infused music attack. It was unlikely that the spark would do anything to the colossus, but at least this way, the music threads would be visible. Dozens of them attached themselves to the rocky fingers of the creature. Upon doing so, the entire arm froze. It didnt last longone or two seconds at mostbut it presented a weakness Dallion could exploit.

Another wave of wind crashed upon him, as the colossus swung with its other hand.

Using his aura sword, Dallion cast an aether sphere around him, as well as several spells to diminish the force of the wind. A few months ago, he had learned that, in case he had to face furies. Now he was even more thankful for it. A tunnel of calmness formed within the wind wave, allowing him to get within several hundred feet of the creatures hand. At that precise point, he did a music attack again, followed immediately by a line slash with the aura sword.

The hand froze still, same as before, only this time the line of destruction sliced through three of the fingers, sending the sections falling to the ground.

Thatll make a nice souvenir, Vihrogon said.

Dallion ignored him, continuing with the same attack pattern. Before the colossus could even pull the rest of his hand back, another music attack froze it in place. This time, ten line attacks followed, severing all but the thumb. An attempt to cut off the entire wrist was also made, but the rock proved too thick to allow such a success.

I can take him, Nox purred from Dallions domain.

Thatll be a bit tricky, buddy. I dont think I can get close enough to use you yet.

Then dont, the crackling said with an air of feline superiority. Just do a line strike with me.

Thats not how it Dallion stopped. Everything he had learned in this world insisted that crackling weapons needed contact to shatter their target. Yet, he had never confirmed it himself. If a music,

spark infused, line attack was possible, couldn't there be other line attacks as well? It was an unorthodox thought, but one that definitely tickled the imagination. Get ready.

Swinging his aura sword, Dallion cast a levitation spell with it, then summoned his Nox dagger. The weapon emerged in the spot of the spell circle, ready for use. Without wasting a moment, Dallion let go of the sword, grabbing the dagger and doing a multi point attack aimed at the town-sized hand of rock.

Initially, nothing was visible. For a split second, Dallion wondered whether he had made the correct decision. Then it happened. Cracks became visible on the rock. Minuscule at first, they quickly grew, spreading outwards. Before the Colossus could react, they had covered a quarter of the hand.

Now, Harp said.

Dallion didn't need telling twice, slashing the air with his harpsisword.

A thin line split the hand in two. Unable to withstand the force, the cracked parts of the rock burst, shooting pebbles in all directions. At their present size and speed, there were a dozen spells that Dallion could do to avoid any damage. However, he chose to take a different approach.

From a logical perspective, the pebbles remained part of the colossus. As such, they could be considered an attack by an enemy. It was a bit of a stretch, but if proven true, that would provide Dallion with the advantage he needed to finish the fight.

Why can't you see me now, old man? he twisted in the air, combining guard, acrobatics, and athletics, as well as a touch of magic. Instinct told him how to move to complete a sequence.

It was a long shot, but fortunately it worked. Time slowed down by a quarter. This only made the job of avoiding the rest a lot easier. A second guard sequence followed, then a third, and a fourth. Before Dallion knew it, time had completely stopped. Remaining still in mid-air, even without the aid of his flight spell, he was able to take a good look at the colossus head. It was a lot bigger than he remembered. Several mid-sized towns could easily fit inside. From here, one quick flight boost and he'd make it right to the ear from where to perform his fatal attack. Should he, though?

Relying on magic had made him neglect, even outright forget, a lot of the skills he had achieved in the past. That included his empathy abilities. During the last few months, Dallion had questioned a lot of buildings and items, but it had been a while since he'd given an enemy the opportunity to surrender.

Dont, Harp said in his realm. We aren't in the realms. There is no benefit for him to accept.

Are you sure?

The creature was awakened by a chainling. If there was even a spark of reason, it is now gone. The best thing you could do is free it from its prison.

If I do, will it go to the banished realms?

The guardian didn't reply.

Harp? Dallion asked mentally.

I dont know. Their age ended long before ours started. It might return there, or it might not. Only the Moons know.

That was likely true, but at the moment Dallions conversations with the Moons were rather one-sided.

Do you think therell be more?

He asked.

Maybe. Im not sure. The Moons allowed it to happen, so it must have occurred before.

So it might occur again, Dallion added. That doesnt sound good.

Dont worry too much. If it was easy, the chainlings would have attacked you with it to start with.

That was true, but Dallion didnt like the notion of banished creatures appearing in the real world. The colossus itself was more scary than difficult. Sure, it could easily destroy a town or city, but not the awakened inside. In some ways, it was similar to a dragon. Like all purely magic creatures, they were terrifying, and still Katka had defeated one without issue.

Lets get this over with, Dallion thought.

Casting a flight spell boost with the index finger of his right hand, Dallion crossed the distance separating him from the monsters ear. When time resumed, he was no more than ten feet away.

A massive opening, the size of a large cave, continued into the colossus head. A feeling of void emanated from within, merging with the darkness. Dallion didnt hesitate, doing five point strikes with his harpsisword. The spark within the attack briefly illuminated the inside of the opening, as it continued further in.

Expecting the unexpected, Dallion burst into instances.

The dull rumble of a bang came from within. The entire colossus froze still. Unwilling to leave it all to chance, Dallion followed up the attack with a series of Nox dagger strikes, then continuing with the harpsisword again.

Screeches of agony filled the air, causing all the instances to immediately pull back. There could be no doubt that he had hit the chainling within the mountains head. The question was whether he had killed it or just wounded it.

Why cant I have three hands? Dallion cast an aether sphere round the Nox dagger, then grabbed the aura sword that had been faithfully floating with him. Juggling with three mutually exclusive powers was getting a bit too much.

Magic threads ran through the blade once more. Spinning in place, Dallion cast dozens of spells. Each spell sent a rain of aether blades flying towards the still motionless head. Individually, a blade was less significant than a splinter. But with hundreds of them, or even thousands, they were enough to destroy something already weakened.

Purple light filled the colossus ear canal. Within moments they faded away, followed by an explosion that took out fifty of Dallions instances. A mere seven had remained, though even they

werent unscathed. Chunks of rock had torn through parts of the protective mesh of magic threads, dealing minor injuries.

Dallion quickly extended more magic from his body, filling the breaches, while also casting a healing spell. Five hundred feet from him, the head of the colossus crumbled into itself like a hollow egg.

That was a bit close, he thought, adrenaline pumping into his bloodstream.

So cool, old man! Onda cheered from within his realm.

He could have simply entered the ear and avoided a lot of that, Vihrogon said in a slightly critical tone. The colossus wouldnt have been able to attack him while inside its head.

Wheres the fun in that? Dallion asked. What matters is that

COMBAT INITIATED

A purple rectangle appeared.

Chapter 772: Things That Don't Exist

The body of the colossus moved. Its actions were twice faster than before, as if the head had been constraining it. Dallion instantly realized this, casting several spells to boost his body and reaction traits. Thanks to his naturally high values, he rarely needed to resort to this since joining the Academy. In this case, he had no alternative. If he were to guess, the colossus traits were in the high seventies, at least. The complete lack of magic prevented Dallion from seeing anything more. Apparently, his teachers at the Academy were wrongthere were creatures that didnt have even a shred of magic.

I can sense you, speckling, a voice boomed in Dallions head. Even if I can no longer see you.

Isnt it supposed to die when I take out the head? Dallion asked in his realm.

Im not sure, the harpsisword replied.

Obviously, that wasnt the case. While human in appearance, the mountain functioned in a far different way. One could speculate that all parts of its body were autonomous from each other, powered by a force different from magic. Dismembering him undoubtedly made the colossus weaker, but it wasnt enough to defeat him.

The one functional stone arm moved through the air like a hurricane, determined to grab hold of Dallion. The speed was incredible, making it seem as if a dozen hands were reaching for him. It was only through magic and splitting that Dallion remained half a step ahead.

I know you can hear me, speckling, the mountain continued. I can sense the Moons voice within you.

Striking with his harpsisword, Dallion tried to disable the arm of his opponent by using a music spark attack. Strands attached to their target as before, but failed to make it freeze. Instead, the colossus pulled away, causing them to snap.

And the Moons breath, the headless entity added.

If you want to talk, why do you keep fighting?

Who says we cannot do both?

The colossus spun around, doing a spin kick. The speed and size of the foot made it impossible for Dallion to avoid it, even with fifty instances. Aware of that, he used the aura sword to cast as many barriers as possible, as well as two preemptive healing spells.

The slam was dull and painful, hurling him back hundreds of feet. Had it occurred on the ground, Dallion wouldnt have gotten away with as little damage as he had. He could feel the effect of the healing spells activating, peeling away the pain.

Damn, that was fast, he thought, flying straight up. He had barely noticed his protective barriers shattering.

Youre a tough one, the colossus remarked. Most would have died by now.

The casual way in which he said it suggested that he had fought humans before many times.

With a bit more experience you could have even won.

What do you mean? Dallion felt waves of terror spread throughout his body, terror he hadnt felt in a while. I have defeated you.

You just cut off some parts. Nothing that cannot be fixed. The one who defeats me will be someone else.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion sent out a multitude of point attacks. Experience and a high body trait had gotten him used to this sort of attack, though even so, he wouldnt be able to continue doing it nonstop.

His opponent shielded itself with its handless arm. Craters covered it all the way up to the elbow, loosening huge chunks. Sadly, that was not enough to cause it to break off, let alone harm the colossus torso.

Its useless, the mountain said. None of us can lose to the other. You dont have the strength and I dont have the reach. It lowered its arms, turning in Dallions direction. Are you trying to become the architect?

The architect?

Dallion had heard the title mentioned in the memories of the Purple Moons familiar. If he remembered well, the architect had created the glorious city of the past era, long before the races had tried to take over the world. If memory served, he had also created the magic familiar himself.

He was strong Too strong, filled with the breath, and sight, and voice of the Moons. Youre strong too, but youre not him.

Youre from the past.

Correct, Speckling. Im from the old world. I never thought there would come a time that I could be thankful to the void for helping me return.

The colossus tore off its left arm and threw it at Dallion. It was so massive that precision wasnt of importance. Splitting into a hundred instances, Dallion cast a speed spell as he flew in dozens of directions. Ninety-seven of his instances didnt make it. Three managed to survive. The arm of rock continued flying for several seconds more until it crashed in the distance, sending up a cloud of dust into the air.

How did you return? Dallion added as much calm as he could into his voice. From what he had seen, music seemed to have an effect on the being.

The barrier is thin. All it took was a strong push, and the void was strong enough. There was a time when we would fight it. Long before the banishment, we were the protectors of the world.

It was difficult to make out the exact emotions. There seemed to be regret, but not hatred. It was almost as if the colossus knew that he wouldnt last long and wanted to experience one last fight to the fullest.

Did you fight the architect? Dallion asked.

Laughter echoed in his mind.

Im too weak to fight the architect. I was but a pebble, but I too had aspirations.

Answer me a few questions and Ill fight you. Dallion was taking a huge gamble. Even if the colossus were to agree, defeating him had proven more than a little challenging. Harp was right that fighting such creatures was very different in the realms. Had that been the case, Dallion would already have won.

Amusing. If the creature still had a head, he probably would be grinning. What do you want to know, pebble?

What was the old world like?

It was a world like this, only different. Now only specklings exist. Weak specklings

How do you know theyre weak?

Ive fought many during your awakening trials. The laws of the Moons tie us up with so many restrictions that we cannot move, and still, they cant defeat us. Our size is reduced to yours, our skills removed, even our weaknesses are made apparent for anyone to see.

Were the colossi that Dallion had fought this big? Glorias ring guardian the first he had faced had been a mere seven feet tall. That would make her less than one percent of her normal size.

Specklings used to be strong because they had to. Even when they were protected by the Moons, they had to pull their weight. Now, there are so many who arent even given the gift.

What about the architect?

I answered your question. Now fight as you promised. The mountain changed stance, clouds of dust rising up as his leg made a side sweep along the ground.

So much for getting answers for free. At least the music seemed to have mellowed the creature a bit. The thirst for battle was still there, though slightly less aggressive.

Two more questions, Dallion said. The gears of his mind were turning, searching for suitable ways of attack. His most powerful strikes had proven not powerful enough, and his magic wasn't up to a level where it could do anything better.

Agreed. One before we fight and one after. If you lose, you get only one.

One question. There were so many things Dallion wanted the answer to, but among them one had a clear priority: a question that had to do with the imminent present.

I'll ask both now. Cautiously, Dallion floated towards the colossus. After you answer the first, I'll charge at you. The calm that he was adding to his voice was replaced by overconfidence. Is there a danger of more of you returning to the world? His grip round the aura sword tightened. And my second question. What can you tell me about the Eighth Moon?

The Eighth Moon. Interesting that a youngling like you would know about that. Very well. Defeat me and you'll have your answer. As for your first question, there always is a danger. There have been many times that one of us was brought here from the banished realm. Some specklings brought entire armies, no doubt more will in future. He bent his knees, ready to meet Dallion's attack. Are you pleased with your answer?

Yes, Dallion lied. Learning that it wasn't a big deal to summon such creatures, especially now, wasn't a relief in the least. When this battle had started, he believed to be facing cultists or chainlings created by the Azures. He hadn't expected an encounter with a monster from the old world. Ready?

If I had a head, I'd nod, his opponent replied.

If nothing else, that characteristic of the race remained the same: honorable, with a slight sense of humor.

Dallion split into a hundred and fifty instances, then darted straight at the colossus. His aura sword spun around, casting dozens of dual-spell combos.

Purple circles the size of houses filled the air around him. Each summoned a massive chunk of rock from the battlefield, then sped it up, launching it at the headless mountain. The speed couldn't compare to what Lux could have achieved, but it was impressive nonetheless.

You think you can hurt me with a little bit of hail? Disappointment echoed in its voice.

Paying no notice, Dallion continued with the spellcasting. Circles of magic symbols appeared all over him, covering his body like tattoos.

Dont, Harp said in Dallion's realm. I can defeat him.

Dallion didnt respond. He had gone through his plan dozens of times. Even if he didnt defeat the mountain, there was no way for him to get harmed. This was something he had learned from Gleam: the only difference between something fragile and something indestructible was a well-placed spell.

The colossus swung to meet Dallions charge. Stone met indestructible, causing a thundering boom that echoed for miles. Two equal forces clashed, neither willing to give way to the other. For a split second, it was as if time stopped for all instances. This was the moment of truth: whether Dallion would break through, or be tossed away like a sparrow hit by a club.

Cracks formed on the stone arm, unable to keep up with the pressure. Shielded by his symbols of invulnerability, Dallion went on, drilling through the rock like a bullet. Half of his momentum was gone, but it didnt matter. All he had to do was to cast a few more speed spells before he hit the colossus chest.

Magnificent, the mountain said. I was wrong about you.

Water erupted from the harpsisword, covering Dallion with a protective layer as he slammed into the massive cliffs in front. Moments later, thousands of streaks shot out from the colossus entire torso. A force greater than anything Dallion had ever seen exploded within his opponent, shattering the mountain in a single go.

VANQUISHER OF NOTHING

(+0 Awakening, +0 Body, +0 Mind, +0 Reaction, +0 Perception, +0 Empathy, +0 Magic)

You destroyed something that no longer exists.

If this had been a realm, there would have been hundreds of red rectangles, possibly an achievement as well. Since it was the real world, the rectangles were replaced by rocks flying tens of miles in all directions. Only the immediate area around Dallion was safe from flying debris.

Just like the eye of a hurricane, he thought.

Devastation was everywhere: craters, massive cracks in the ground, mounds of boulders, not to mention a newly created gorge. Taking one good look with all his instances, Dallion let them fade away, then slowly floated to the ground.

Would I have made it? he asked, waving his aura sword in order to start summoning his gear back to him.

The arm, yes, the harpsisword replied. The rest no.

I see He sheathed his weapons one by one. Any guesses what the achievement meant?

That the colossus shouldnt exist in this world.

I saw that. Lets hope we dont come across other things that dont exist. The time for rest and complaining was over. Dallion had to find Adzorg and stop him before more things made their way into the world.

Chapter 773: Beneath a layer of Void

It was a good fight, Gen said, tapping Dallion on the shoulder.

A good fight Dallion repeated.

That could be argued. While he had survived the encounter, he had gotten a lot less than he had hoped. The colossus had died before answering the third question, and as for the achievement

Dallion looked at the black plaque on the achievement wall of his realm. Far darker than the materials of all other plaques, it seemed to be laughing, taunting him with its zero point reward.

Think that has something to do with the curse? Dallion glanced at his weapon guardians.

Both Harp and Vihrogon were there with him, and both had a completely different air. Harp emanated worry and pride, visible like blue clusters of grapes within her body. The dryad, on the other hand, only had blobs of regret.

Its possible. There are achievements that dont give anything, the dryad said. Youre lucky to be alive, Dal. I know you want to succeed in everything, but you faced a banished creature and won.

Harp won, Dal corrected.

You survived and without being turned into a chainling.

There was no denying the facts. Survival wasnt guaranteed in the real world, especially after such a monstrosity had emerged from the ground. That was also another reason he couldnt afford to waste opportunities. Even if the device wasnt activated now, it was already causing enough chaos for the void to drip into the real world.

Ill be fine. Dallion took a few steps closer to the achievement plaque. That was supposed to act as a reminder. Ignoring all the petty trivialities, he had two goals: save himself and save the world, preferably in that order. If he didnt, the void would consume both and he might well end up the next Star or a brainless chainling puppet.

Compelled by a slight degree of OCD, he slid his thumb over the plaque in an attempt to remove grime. To his astonishment, he succeeded. To an even greater surprise, the layer that briefly emerged beneath the grime was different from the one on top.

Dal, what are you doing? Vihrogon asked.

The realm owner gave him a sign to remain quiet, then slid his entire left hand over the plaque. A patch of cleanliness became visible.

VANQUISHER OF NAUGHT

(+1 Awakening, +1 Body, +1 Mind, +1 Reaction, +1 Perception, +1 Empathy, +1 Magic)

You destroyed something that no longer exists.

Vanquisher of Naught?

He wondered as the layer of darkness covered the plaque before his very eyes.

What the heck is that? He turned to Harp.

It had to be linked to the curse! Apparently, it wasnt enough that he had to experience nightmares and crippling pain, but from here on, it seemed that some of the achievements he gained would be

blocked. The only silver lining was that once he resolved the curse, he'd instantly gain a lot of trait statistics.

Just to make sure, he rubbed off the area with the numbers. The numbers changed for a few moments, before turning back to zeroes.

I have never seen that before, the nymph replied.

I know what it is, Vihrogon said in a dark tone. It's the Star.

I killed the Star. It's too early for there to be a new one.

Then there's someone who knows some of his tricks. Think of it as a sort of delevelling a permanent illusion that makes something become less than it is. Back during my days of conquest, the Star used the same on those of questionable allegiance. As long as they fought for the right side, all was well. The rest of the time he nodded in the direction of the plaque. You better go. Three chainlings got to you while you were in your realm. There might be more who could do the same.

You were subjected to that, weren't you? Dallion asked. Only someone who'd been through this could experience such bitterness and regret.

It was a long time ago, the other replied and left in a dash of roots.

Dallion looked at the trail the dryad had created, then back at the achievement.

Go. Harp approached him, placing her hand on his shoulder. I'll take care of things here. Focus on things out there.

With a nod, Dallion glanced at the gathered echoes and returned to the real world. The devastation the fight had caused was still there, making the grave of a creature that wasn't supposed to be in the world. Was it a grave, though? According to the Moon laws, all guardians were supposed to be sent back to the banished realm. However, was the colossus a guardian anymore?

Gathering his gear and other possessions, Dallion left the mark of destruction behind, continuing towards the kingdom of Alor.

The trip was long, even for an awakened. Several times he was stopped by small groups of people: scouting parties, mercenaries, even outright brigands that tried to rob and kill him. In some cases, his hunters emblem was enough to ensure safe passage. In others, Dallion had to use more forceful arguments. None of those were his greater fear, though. Rather, it was the hours he spent sleeping in his realm. Even with Gem keeping watch, Dallion was afraid that another chainling would attempt to attack him, or possibly drag a colossus into the world again. He knew that the chances of this happening were remote, and yet the subconscious element of fear remained.

Why don't you just fly? Dirohs echo asked from within his realm. So what if someone sees you're a mage?

I'm not worried about someone finding out, Dallion lied. I don't want to give Adzorg the chance to escape.

You're really out to get him, aren't you?

How's the Academy? he abruptly changed the topic. Has anyone been giving you trouble?

You wish. With Katka watching over my original like a hawk, no one dares. Her explanations could be a bit better. Good thing that your former classmate is there to help out.

Thats good.

My original managed to complete her first symbol a few days ago. Ill still need a while to get the hang of it.

Dont worry. Things get easier later on.

Only for a mage. Naturals must use artifacts. Its not the same.

During most of his existence in this world, Dallion had complained that those in power used shortcuts to provide opportunities to people who didnt deserve them. Some would say that Diroh was no exception, but they would be wrong. The power that had let her awaken and granted her a unique blend of natural magic was by no means pleasant. Although the echo hadnt said it directly, he could tell that using artifacts to cast spells at the level of a novice exhausted her.

Tell Cheska to Dallion abruptly stopped. He had spotted something in the distance.

Tens of miles away, a well-guarded caravan was approaching. Judging by the direction the wagons were facing, it was going towards Alor, but hadnt left from the empire.

Talk to you later. Dallion put on his blocker ring and rushed in the direction of the caravan.

The closer he got, the more details he could see. The group was composed of ten wagons, all loaded up to such an extent that the wheels were having difficulty supporting the load. Three dozen mercenaries humans with a few furies were providing protection. All of them looked like veterans, although their awakened level wasnt over twenty-five at most.

After diminishing the distance by three quarters, Dallion slowed down. He had reached the distance at which theyd likely see him, so it was better to approach them walking.

Ten minutes later, he knew that he had overestimated their abilities. Upon spotting him, part of the mercenaries broke off from the main group, riding in his directions. The horses were painfully slow in comparison to his own sprint, although they were the endurant type.

Dallion and the riders continued moving towards one another. Once they got to about fifty feet apart, they stopped.

Greetings, the lead mercenary said.

If it were possible for there to be a female copy of Spike, that was her. Wearing almost as many weapons as clothes, she seemed like someone who had seen a lot and knew when to attack and when not, even if she preferred the former. Dallion would have loved to hear what her items had to say about the woman, but still kept the blocker ring on.

By the Seven, he replied. I thought you might need some help. If youre headed to Alor, that is.

Oh? The mercenary squeezed her legs, making her horse move closer to Dallion. Her glance quickly fell on the emblem Dallion had made sure to be in view. Hunter. She then looked at his face. Why are you wearing disfocus?

My client prefers that others dont know that Im here, he replied. Or what Im searching for.

Hmm.

Its not you, if thats what youre worried about.

Who said Im worried?

Your horse, for one. Dallion reached out in the direction of the creature.

The animals quickly neighed and made an attempt to move back. The attempt was forcefully stopped by his rider.

Whats your level? another of the mercenaries asked.

Over fifty, Dallion decided to go with a plausible number.

A level fifty on a hunt. You must be after something very nasty or very valuable.

Its both. So, do we travel together? Or do you prefer to continue on your own?

Hesitation emanated from the woman like a beacon. Having a level-fifty hunter was a good deal, but at the same time, theyd be foolish to fully trust him.

Ill have to ask. The dwarves call the shots here.

Dwarves? Go ahead. Ill wait.

One of them turned around, galloping back to the rest of the caravan. A few minutes later, a horn soundedthe offer had been accepted.

As it soon turned out, the merchants that owned the caravan were just returning to the capital with their final haul. With the war between the Tamin empire and the Azure federation intensifying, even kingdoms that werent involved were stocking up. Alor was no exception. Formally part of the Alliance of Stone and Steel, they had fortified their cities, ready should the war spill into their territory.

Ironically, that was to Dallions benefit. Since all the information the General had given him was the name of the kingdom, the fewer cities he had to search, the better. With tensions high, it was logical that all treasures made their way to the capital, which had the best protection and the largest underground vaults.

Despite the strength of the group, and the relative calm of the area, there were frequent indications that the war raged throughout the world and not only that. One evening, just as the advance scouting party was preparing to check out the route the caravan was going to follow the next morning. A glow of purple emerged on the horizon.

There we go again, a mercenary said, barely even glancing in the direction.

Whats that? Dallion feigned ignorance. His aether sight made it perfectly clear that the glow in the distance came from vortexes.

Magic towers. The mercenary said with a dry laugh. They appear, shine for a few days, then vanish again. The mages go wild for them, even if most cant reach them in time.

I didnt know there were mages so far west.

There aren't. We still get the towers, though. There's been a lot of them lately. Good thing they're harmless or the kingdom would be freaking out.

Harmless was hardly the word Dallion would use. As a mage, he wanted to rush towards the horizon and earn a few more levels of magic. He suppressed the desire. The vortexes weren't a sign of anything good, but an indication that Adzorg had been tinkering with the device again, or would be.

If this keeps up, they'll reach the capital in a few months, the female Spike-clone said. Maybe weeks.

Weren't they supposed to be harmless? Dallion asked.

No magic is harmless. The king sent a request for help from the rest of the alliance. Apparently, they can't spare the mages right now, so we get to look at the shiny lights and hope that nothing bad happens in the meantime.

Fat chance of that.

How long till we get to the capital?

Another three or four days if there are no surprises on the way. Depends on what the scouts say.

Three days was too long.

I think I'll be leaving you in the morning, he stood up, moving away from the campfire. If those things are as frequent as you say, I'll have to hurry up finding my prey.

Chapter 774: City of Dwarves

Denied! the mercenary dwarf shouted. Try again in a month.

It was common for walls and gates to surround a city's domain, but Dallion had never seen a city so cocooned by stone and metal before. Located smack in the middle of a mountain peak, the city of Vert was only accessible through wide passageways blocked by metal gates several feet thick. Only dwarves had the ability to mold metal by touch and pass through. Everyone else needed special permission from the tunnel guards.

Large open areas in the mountains served as gathering points for caravans, mercenaries, and anyone else coming to do business with the city. Dallion had entered one of them easily thanks to his hunter's emblem. Continuing to the city itself, though, proved not as easy. It seemed that because of the war even hunters were no longer welcome, not human ones, in any event.

I have money, he said. I just wish to buy something.

Good for you, the guard grumbled. Next!

It was obvious that there was no next. Dallion had been the only one trying to gain entry. Everyone else either had legitimate business with someone of importance in the city, or knew better than to try.

One single spell and Dallion could easily pass through the wall, with or without permission. However, that was going to reveal Dallion to everyone in the vicinity. Worse than all, there was clear evidence that there was at least one other mage around. He had managed to get a glimpse of magic symbols on a few of the city buildings through the small window the guard had opened. It

was impossible to tell who the original creator of the symbols was, although there was no question regarding their function: spy markers. Through them, a mage could observe distant locations, similar to what cameras allowed on Earth.

The intensity of the glow suggested that the symbols were brand new a month at most suggesting the mage was still here. It couldn't be Adzorg the old man was too careful to leave such obvious clues behind. But that wasn't the only person Dallion had to be cautious of.

How about you tell me what it would take to get in? Dallion was losing his patience.

How about you take that defocus item off? the dwarf countered.

Using magic skills to convince him remained an option, but not one Dallion was willing to resort to just yet.

I have forging skills. I can shape special metals.

Everyone has forging skills. What else will you show off? Dancing? The dwarf crossed his arms.

Excuse me, sergeant, another dwarf interrupted.

Subtly splitting into instances, Dallion peeked through the opening to see a rather stout dwarf approach. He was well rounded, far more so than the guard, wearing a set of flawless white clothes. Most importantly, the symbol of the Order of the Seven Moons was visible, embroidered on his short cape.

The guard instantly stood to attention.

This one's here on a pilgrimage at our request, the dwarf of the Order continued. Would you mind?

Yes, Bishop, the guard replied tensely. I understand, but prince Chat gave strict orders

The prince doesn't rule over the kingdom yet. Until he does, if he has anything against my decision, he knows where to find me.

Even after everything he'd been subjected to, Dallion couldn't help but feel pity for the guard. Right now, he had been put in the unenviable position of becoming an involuntary intermediary between two people of power. While there was no way to be certain whether the prince wasn't a noble in name only, he was the son of the ruler, and as for the bishop like everyone else in the Order, he had more power than people thought.

Will you make an opening or must I? The bishop's tone hardened.

The unfortunate guard immediately turned towards the metal door and stuck his hands in it. They passed through the thick sheet of metal as if it were clay, then continued sideways, forming a small opening.

Just like pulling curtains, Dallion thought. He could see the magic threads passing through the dwarf's fingers and affecting the metal. Another time he would have even paused to admire it, but right now he had pressing matters to take care of.

Lowering his head, he stepped through, moving next to the bishop.

Bishop, he said with a slight bow.

Initiate, the other said in return. Come along. Lets not keep the sergeant from his job.

The unfortunate guard brought back his hands together, causing the temporary opening to close. Judging by the anger and bitterness emanating from him, if another outsider would never enter the capital, it would be too soon.

You should be more careful, the bishop whispered as they walked towards one of the tunnel openings leading underground. If the Archbishop adnt warned me, youd never ave been allowed inside.

Im grateful.

It was rather kind of the archbishop to get personally involved, especially since Dallion hadnt mentioned where hed be going. One could always assume that the General had shared the information for a price, but that seemed unlikely. The Order probably had its own ways of keeping track, just as they had the means of instant communication between each other. When people looked at a shrine, they saw a place at which they could increase their level for a minor fee. As Dallion had learned, the shrines were a lot more. The closest comparison he could make was a cross between an army barracks and a cell tower.

A squad of dwarf guards glared at Dallion as he followed the bishop underground. They couldnt afford to say a thing, but made sure to let their displeasure known through other means.

How far down are we going? Dallion asked.

Were staying at this level. The clerics quarters are a suitable enough place for a conversation.

So now they were going to have a conversation? That didnt bode well.

Is it related to my pilgrimage? he asked.

Only youll be able to answer that.

The underground shrine was a large cylindrical structure of white stone that shot up all the way to the caverns ceiling. There were four main entrances, though only one of them was adorned with marble statues.

A pair of clerics quickly opened the double door as the bishop approached, then closed it once he and his guest had entered. One look was enough for Dallion to tell that despite the simple robes, both were level forty awakened.

There ave been a number of developments since you left Nerosal, the bishop said, rushing down the corridor. Youve seen the gleams, yes?

Yes. There was one in the distance on my way here.

Its more than one. Lately, the sightings ave been increasing. The Archbishop suspects that they are moving towards the capital.

I have similar suspicions. Thats why I came here.

You think the mage is ere? The bishop stopped, his face turning three shades paler.

Maybe, maybe not. In any event, if he isn't, he soon will be. How deep are your connections in the city?

I've been bishop here for seventy years, the dwarf said proudly. I knew the king before he took the throne. He gestured forward, indicating that it was better that they leave the important part of the conversation for there.

I really don't have the time for this. Dallion played around with his blocker ring. Having it on for so long made him feel cut off from the world. If Nil was still here, he'd probably say that was a good thing, since it meant he was getting back to being his former self.

To Dallion's surprise, the room to which the bishop took him turned out to be an altar room. Unlike the usual ones he'd seen in the past, though, there was no crowd of people waiting to get there. In fact, the room resembled more a storage space than anything else. If it weren't for the light emanating from the altar itself, one would have believed it to be exactly that.

Now we can be certain that no one's watching in. The bishop closed the door. Other than the Moons, of course.

Of course. So, what did you wish to talk about?

The Archbishop has a new prophecy. He requests that you don't take part in the war.

That will be difficult.

The war for the towers, the dwarf added.

War for the towers? What the heck was that?

Vortex towers will start rising throughout the battlefield. As a result, all three sides will clash to obtain as much of their magic as possible. You are not to take part.

That's asking too much.

The Archbishop said that it's your choice to make, but if you take part, you risk losing both things you're fighting for.

Vague, but not vague enough. Dallion smiled. It was obvious that the Archbishop was trying to copy the Moons' style and failed at it. He sounded too focused on smaller things. If there was anyone he could be compared to it was Alien. The only difference was that the threats were more subtle.

Any chance I can have a word with him face to face? Dallion slid his fingers along the altar.

No one sees the Archbishop, not even me.

I heard differently.

The Archbishop sees whoever he wants. Anyway, I fulfilled his request. It's up to you what to do from here on. Personally, I'd say listen to him. The Archbishop has been granted prophetic vision by the Moons.

More like carnival tricks, Dallion said to himself. Ill take it into consideration. Now, about my request. Do you know anyone dealing with antiquities?

The bishops eyes widened.

Specifically, artifact statues.

Youre looking for a statue in a city of dwarves?

Artifact statue, Dallion stressed. Its large, larger than me, and was very sought after around the time the poison plague appeared.

Then youll be asking for an invitation to the royal treasury. Alors royal family as an extensive collection of

Anywhere else? Dallion interrupted.

The dwarf frowned and crossed his arms. You know Im a bishop of the Order, right?

Yep, I also know you have a good sense of humor. Thank you, music skills. Im already working for the Order and this is one of the things Ill need to complete my task. The place Im looking for cant be a royal palace, or part of the Order. Im almost sure its something illegal, possibly small-time.

The comments brought a smile to the bishops face. Stroking his beard, he nodded.

What if its above ground?

Possible, but unlikely. If it were that simple, it would have been taken already.

There are a few people at the merchants quarter on level three. Some of the items there were of questionable repute. A lot changed after the city was closed off. Theres no guarantee what you want is still there.

Its a start. Can you arrange an introduction?

I can do better. I can ave one of the merchants of the quarter guide you there personally.

Given that dwarves were often prone to exaggerations, Dallion thought that the bishop would ask a stall seller to show him around that section of the city. It turned out that he was very much mistaken. Following some philosophical discussions about the state of the worldwhich Dallion could have done withouthe was escorted out of the shrine, where a richly dressed dwarf was waiting. The gems that composed the fabric of his clothes were such that he could pass for a minor noble in the empire.

Are you the initiate? The merchants mustaches twitched as he spoke. Unlike the majority of dwarves Dallion had seen so far, this one was exceptionally well groomed to the point that his beard and mustaches were not only trimmed, but waxed as well.

Yes.

Im Amille Darge, the under-banker of the third level merchant quarter.

Under-banker? Is that something like a mayor?

No. The dwarf gave Dallion a look full of disdain. That would be the banker. Lets get this over with.

There was a time when Dallion would have cared about making a good first impression. As Nil used to say, theres no fixing a first impression. After a few years in the world, it had become apparent that the saying was only partially true. Only those who wanted to impress had to worry about first impressions. Those who had to be impressed couldnt care less.

Lead the way.

It was said that all dwarf cities followed the same basic principles: the deeper one went, the more affluent the inhabitants became. In this case, the merchants Dallion was going to visit could be considered lower-middle class.

Several people deal with statues, the merchant explained. Even when artifact statues are concerned. How will you know which one you need?

Just get me close and Ill deal with the rest.

Suit yourself.

Dallion smirked, then slid off his blocker ring. The moment he did, a chorus of Harps voice filled his head.

Draw me! Hes here!

Slow down, what

There was no need to finish. Less than a hundred feet away, engaged in a discussion with the owner of an artifact merchant, stood the only other human in the city.

Adzorg, Dallion whispered.

Barely had he done so when a column of purple light suddenly erupted from below, enveloping half the merchants quarter, then went on to drill through all the upper layers until it revealed the sky.

Chapter 775: City Scorching Vortex

Simultaneously, both mages prepared for battle. The difference was that while Dallion was taking off the ring artifacts that prevented him from casting spells, Adzorg put on such that allowed him to. Even after the old mans deleveling at the hands of the order, there was no telling who had the upper hand. All that Dallion knew was that he preferred to have a squad of battle mages with him for the task.

Ruby, wound him! Dallion ordered as he grabbed his aura sword.

The shardfly broke its illusion emerging on Dallions shoulder, then sent a few well-aimed wind slashes in the direction of the old man. Several hit Adzorg in the legs, causing a layer of deep purple to flash over the area.

Didnt think youd become so vicious, dear boy. The man cast a spell, lifting him in the air. Commendable execution.

Ignoring the taunts, Dallion cast a series of spells to increase his reaction trait, rise up in the air, and surround himself with aether barriers.

Adzorg did the same. Using fingers, he wasn't able to match the quantity of spells one could do with an aura sword. Yet, he made up for that in quality, combining multiple spells in one. The spell circles he drew weren't mere spell circles, but chains hooked one to the other, each containing symbols Dallion had never seen.

Ruby, pass through! Dallion said as he swung the aura sword leaving a trail of spell circles in the air.

Pausing its attacks, the shardfly flew through, following the flight path of a butterfly. Each time it passed through a spell circle, hundreds of shardfly copies poured out, all flying towards Adzorg.

I'd hoped I taught you better, dear boy. The man sighed as he cast an eleven-circle spell. Never use the same tricks.

A flash of light passed through the air, erasing all the shardfly copies in the process.

Dallion's harpsisword moved on its own, sending out a point attack at the mage. The strike missed by inches, flying by the man and bouncing off the pillar of purple light behind him.

Harp, what was that? Dallion gripped the hilt of the weapon tighter.

You'll always hesitate when facing him, the nymph replied unapologetically. You still want to convince him to surrender, even if he doesn't intend to.

It's my battle, Harp! Dallion gritted his teeth, casting a dozen aether projectile spells. I can handle it.

No, you can't.

You think I'm not ready?

No, I think you don't want to. You're more empath than mage. That's what makes you you, that's the best part of you. The vibrations that composed her voice became softer, warmer. However, it's also the thing that will get you killed. I won't allow that.

A sphere of magic symbols emerged around Adzorg. Its complexity made it impossible to tell what the purpose was. Yet, Dallion didn't have to decipher the spell to know. He had seen part of that spell before, back in the Learning Hall of the Academy that was the spell used to create a perfect illusion.

Spark! Dallion whispered, doing three line strikes in immediate succession.

The lines of glowing white split the air, slicing the sphere in three.

Dallion felt a lump in his throat. Had he stopped the spell? More importantly, had he accidentally killed Adzorg? Based on everything he'd heard about the ex-archmage, there was no way such a simple attack could be successful. And still

No hesitation. The circle cleared, revealing the mage in a full suit of armor. This wasn't a magical construct, but real sky steel armor that didn't suit him in the least. Even so, it had the properties to stop most attacks, even spark ones. Using spark against mages, going straight for line attacks now that you can use them. It's a shame you didn't do more of that at the Academy.

I did, Dallion said, darting through the air straight at the old man.

You've learned a thing or two about strategy and tactics. But you've still got a ways to go.

Not even bothering to evade the attacks, Adzorg flew up towards the opening. While the vortex had filled most of it, a thin circle of sky remained between the rock and the glowing aether. The fact that Adzorg wanted to escape so badly suggested that he had already obtained the item he was looking for. In turn that meant that Dallion couldn't afford to let him go.

Ruby, block his path! Dallion ordered. Gleam, try to get rid of his armor!

Gleam? Dallion wondered. Why did I say that?

The spectral shardfly remained in the banished realm. Dallion had roamed through all the archmage materials he had on the topic and had yet to find a way to summon her back. Maybe Harp was right, maybe facing Adzorg was beyond him right now. Even if that was the case, though, he still had to see it through.

Wind slashes flew at the man, only to be negated by a wind barrier. Despite his looks, the mage was crafty. More a strategist and theoretician, he'd never engaged in battle as far as Dallion had known him. That didn't mean that he couldn't. One didn't just become a guild captain because of looks.

Adzorg flew through the crack leading to the upper level. Dallion followed soon after.

Shouts and yells came from everywhere as dwarves ran in panic through tunnels and caverns, seeking places to hide as the town crumbled around them. Rock and steel that had seemed unbreakable were now crumbling like clay. The light crystals that provided light had become so energized by their vicinity to the vortex that they shone like midday sun.

The moment he flew into the second level, Dallion spun his aura sword, casting a multitude of healing spells.

Healing magic? Adzorg asked, summoning a swarm of aether bats at Dallion. Being soft is a good thing, though not when it's pointless.

The creatures were nothing like Dallion had seen. It wasn't unusual that they were created out of aether; any mage was able to cast temporary constructs. Their shape was what disturbed him, not the shape of a normal creature, but a combination of ovals and triangles, making them appear out of place.

Ruby! Dallion said, pausing his attacks for a moment.

Flicking its wings, the shardfly greeted the bats with its usual attack. Unsurprisingly, there was no effect. The strikes cut the element connections like a razor, but did no real damage. After every strike, the elements quickly combined once more and continued with their attack.

Are you looking down on me? Dallion burst into instances.

Combining attack, guard, and acrobatics, he targeted each individual shape directly with the tip of his harpsisword. The target shattered instantly, allowing Dallion to use the skills bonus, continuing with a multi attack.

On the surface, it almost seemed that Adzorg had messed up. All that Dallion needed to do was evade the bats long enough to gain the time slow bonus. However, that was hardly the case. While he didn't know what the old mage was planning exactly, he wasn't one to make such obvious mistakes.

Dallion and Adzorg reached the first level of the city almost simultaneously. Spell circles flashed constantly around them, as both continued casting at a tremendously fast rate.

Let me fight, Harp said.

There was no denying that the mage had an advantage. While Dallion was still dealing with the aether bats, he wasn't able to shorten the distance between them. Ruby kept on doing his best, but neither his attacks nor Dallion's spells were an issue for Adzorg, who neutralized them long before they could do anything. Somehow, the old man remained several steps ahead the entire time.

If you don't, you'll lose him, the nymph guardian insisted.

This was the moment to choose. It had been a while since Harp had fought his battle for him. If anything, she had said that she would no longer do so. The fact that she was offering meant she believed it to be the only way; more than that, she felt that not doing so might lead to Dallion getting harmed.

Don't kill him, Dallion said as he relaxed his grip.

Receiving his permission, the harpsisword seemed to move on its own, leading his arm along with it.

Just like Gleam

, Dallion thought. Harp claimed that she was in combat gear, everything she had done confirmed that. Even after revealing that she had the spellcraft skill, she rarely used it until now.

A layer of water covered the weapon, doubling it in size. The strings were constantly vibrating, casting spells that Dallion couldn't recognize. There were no distinguishable elements, just large intricate patterns, made entirely of minuscule magic threads.

The moment Adzorg caught sight of it, his fingers moved twice as fast, weaving a more intricate spell than any he had done before. A thick layer of sea iron emerged in front of him, just as a spray of water crystals shot out from the harpsisword, effectively pulverizing it. Even the armor the mage was wearing was severely damaged, punctured in parts.

Harp! Dallion tightened his grip.

He's alright, the nymph said. Apparently, her definition of all right was different than that of the rest of the world. Just slightly wounded.

The aether bats near Dallion faded away. That didn't mean the fight was over, though. Adzorg had already cast several healing spells, along with what looked like a restoration spell. As both rose up into the open air, Dallion could see the holes in the man's armor evaporate away, until it was restored to a flawless state.

Didn't think you'd tip your hand, Adzorg said. He was looking at Dallion, but it was clear that he was addressing Harp. It seems that I underestimated you a bit.

Just give up! Dallion ordered. It doesn't have to end like this.

There's too much at stake, dear boy. I would have preferred if you were with me on this, but

Large spears of ice flew in the space between Adzorg and Dallion, smashing into the purple tower. Dallion's instances spread out. A quarter of them looked in the direction of the new attack, only to see the last person he expected.

Di? he said in utter shock.

I knew you two would end up fighting like this, the ice fury said with a smirk.

She definitely wasn't supposed to be here. It had only been a few weeks since Dallion had left her at the Academy, and yet here she was, wearing half a dozen artifacts, making up for her lack of magic trait.

Without regard to what was going on, the fury flew in the direction of the vortex, attempting to position herself between the two. From her point of view, both were dear people she found close. Unfortunately, this was the worst possible time for her to get involved.

Damn it! Dallion darted forward. Catching Adzorg was all but impossible now. All the old man had to do was cast one mass attack spell, then run away and it would be all over.

Suddenly, a second pillar shot up from the ground, twice as large as the first. In Dallion's mind, time froze. He could see it moving on and swallowing them up. Both he and Adzorg had the means and knowledge to withstand the devastation and venture inside. The same couldn't be said about Diroh. Even with natural skills and Academy gear, it was all but certain she'd be consumed.

Without hesitation, Dallion flew towards the fury. To his surprise and relief, Adzorg did the same. Both had come to the same realization and by the looks of it had opted for the same solution.

Hold still! Dallion shouted, as he waved his aether sword, casting dozens of aether spheres around them.

Meanwhile, Adzorg also cast a spell, although his was somewhat different. Several giant barbed rings emerged, surrounding the spheres and him along with them. All that followed was purple.

VORTEX AWAKENING

You are in a level 9 VORTEX

Defeat the guardian to Absorb the VORTEX

Chapter 776: Motley Crew, Vortex Alliance

Threads of magic twisted together, gaining form. Bit by bit, the elements of a room formed a college dorm room. Beds appeared, then furniture, posters, followed by a strangely familiar mess. Dallion's sensation of weightlessness slowly vanished, as he found himself standing in this room. Strangely enough, the only thing missing was the door.

At first, he was confused, trying to figure out how he had gotten here as well as where he was. Within a few moments, the mystery was gone, replaced by two options. Either the Moons were messing with his head again, or the vortex was.

Is this another dream, Felygn? Dallion asked, making his way to the window.

It was pitch outside. The dream clearly hadn't bothered filling in the room's surroundings. To his surprise, not even a Moon was visible in the distance.

Not exactly, a voice said behind him.

Turning around, Dallion saw a nymph dressed in purple. Notably, there was a firebird on the shoulder of an aether firebird.

Galatea, Dallion whispered.

No hello for me? the aetherbird chirped.

Aether Dallion still wasn't sure how things stood between them. He couldn't sense any anger or open hostility, but then again, this was a dream. There was no guarantee any of his powers would work as they should. Did I mess up?

You mess up all the time, the bird chirped.

I'm not here for that, the Moon said in a firm tone. You have a basic idea of what's going on, so I can talk to you.

That's a first, Dallion thought. Up till now, the Moons treated him as an ignorant fool.

The device is weakening the barriers between realms, he stated, probing.

That's only half true. It's not only the device. It's you as well.

Normally Dallion would have taken that badly. Right now, he felt absolutely calm, almost as if he expected it.

Why? he asked. Because of the curse?

In order to break it, you must become stronger, but in order to become stronger, you must break the curse. A perfect Catch 22, as you'd say. However, as far as magic is concerned, there's an exception.

Isn't there always when magic is concerned?

I can still read your mind. The Moon sounded annoyed.

Taking a few steps next to Dallion, he looked out of the window and snapped his fingers. A purple moon appeared in the darkness, no larger than a coin. The glow coming from it was quite bright, but still couldn't illuminate anything, giving the impression that the entire dorm was floating in space.

Use the device to get stronger.

That wasn't advice Dallion expected. If anything, the Moons so far had given the impression that they wanted the device destroyed. Since it risked devastating the world, everyone except the star spawn and Adzorg would be of such an opinion. So, why was the Moon of magic being so contrary?

The archbishop of the order told me differently, he said cautiously.

No one wants the void to pour into the world, but that doesn't stop them from taking advantage. Why not you too?

You're saying absorb as many vortices as I can?

That's the basic idea. You'll learn more when you wake up.

So, this is a dream, Dallion thought.

When in a vortex, dreams and reality can be both.

The moment the Moon said that, darkness trickled down the edges of the room. What he had assumed to be a vast void outside gained substance and was now filling the room like mud.

Instantly, Dallion moved his fingers in an attempt to cast a spell, but no threads went out of his tips.

Of course, he managed to think before waves of pain and darkness engulfed him.

A split-second lasted an eternity, during which the conflicting sensations of pain and numbness fought for complete dominance of his being. There was a moment when the void seemed to win, but pain refused to let go.

Damn you! Dallion shouted, jumping up.

The darkness was gone, along with the pain and sense of void. He was sitting on the ground in the middle of a constantly shifting landscape. There was a person nearby. Upon seeing him, Dallion burst into dozens of instances, summoning his weapons in many of them.

Seems he's alive and well, Adzorg said with an indignant expression. Cast a flight spell and let's continue this in the air.

Curiosity made Dallion look at the ground as five of his instances were casting that exact spell. The spot he had been was the only non-changing one anywhere to be seen. With his current level of magic, he was able to see the boundaries of the thin circle. From what he could make out, they were some sort of anchoring spell.

His first thought was that he was in the vortex. The second to split into a hundred instances more and look around for Diroh.

My original is fine, her echo said from his realm.

Almost the moment she did, Dallion spotted the fury up in the sky. Unlike him and Adzorg, she didn't seem remotely hurt. It was good to know that she had been lucky for once.

Choosing an instance that had risen in the air, Dallion went on to summon both his main blades. The old mage didn't seem at all impressed. It was plainly visible that the vortex had done more harm to him than anyone else. There was no trace of the armor he thought with. More importantly, a number of the magic artifacts were broken. No matter how much Dallion focused, he couldn't see any magic threads within. For all intents and purposes, they were nothing more than lifeless pieces of metal.

Well, dont you have anything to say? Adzorg asked. After chasing me for so long, I thought youd at least gloat a little.

I didnt catch you.

You might as well have. I was almost convinced that youd receive help from the Moons to find me, and with such impeccable timing. Not only that, but you brought someone you knew I wouldnt harm. He glanced at Diroh.

You know me, Dallion replied. Below him, the circle of ground lost its stability, changing like the rest of the terrain. Looking closely, one could see the threads indicating what the next change would be and when it would occur.

I said almost. With the amount of guck inside of you, theres no way the Moons would have helped you this much.

Deep inside, Dallion had to agree. Lately, even when they wanted to help, they didnt. admitting that wasnt to his benefit, though. The stronger Adzorg believed him to be, the better.

Im part of the circle now, he said. I have means at my disposal.

You still trust them? Even after everything youve seen them do?

I dont trust them. Were just taking advantage of each other. I trust you less. You should have told me about your curse.

Ah. I see youve had a few words with the Order. They always liked to meddle in anything and everything. He waved his hand. For the moment, that doesnt matter. Weve got a bigger issue.

In the distance, chunks of ground tore off, rising to the sky. In an overly simplistic way, it was as if the vortex was attempting to create clouds in some crude fashion.

The only way to escape the vortex is to consume it, Adzorg said. Which means making it all the way there. He pointed to the distance towards a large purple mountain. Similar to everything else, the mountain too shifted appearance, but its height remained. And by that, I mean we must fight our way through.

You could have escaped, Dallion said.

No, I couldnt. Despite what you think, I didnt intend to leave Di and you

The vortex, Dallion clarified. While I was out, you could have escaped with Di and left me behind. Did she make you stay?

Oh, she very well attempted. The mage crossed his arms. The point is, dear boy, that even if she hadnt, Id have acted in the same way. The sad truth is that I cant escape the vortex. None of us alone can. Mind you, thats still not a guarantee that the three of us will manage. Im hopeful, though. He glanced at Harp. You hold just as many surprises as when I met you.

And it has nothing to do with gaining a bit of magic on the way?

There was a long moment of silence, after which the man laughed.

Your newfound level of cynicism is remarkably healthy. Don't worry, only you'll be absorbing any magic.

The statement was quickly put in the too-good-to-be-true category. Concentrating, Dallion tried to use his magic skills to determine whether the old man was lying, but failed to do so. Apparently, not all of his artifacts had been destroyed upon entering the vortex.

Both my and Diroh's levels are capped. There's no going beyond that, even with magic. Artifacts help us ignore that limit, but we can never increase it. The faintest notes of sadness resonated in his voice. Having a vortex emerge within a city was unfortunate. If

There's movement! Diroh shouted. The fury flew in the direction of Dallion and Adzorg, but no sooner had he done so than the mage raised his hand.

Stay there! he ordered.

It's too late for that. They're already

Stay. There. Each word was said with a firmness that only an archmage could muster. In that moment, Dallion saw Adzorg as the person he was a true leader of the Academy, not a schemer like his two successors.

Splitting into instances, he glanced in the direction Diroh was referring to. The chunks of land had successfully transformed into something mimicking clouds. Small humanoid-like beings resembling stick-figures made of magic threads formed a small flock, approaching with alarming speed. As they did, chunks of cloud matter amassed on the wireframe, granting it a more lifelike shape.

Haven't faced that before. Dallion noted. Any idea what they are?

The vortex is mimicking us. The first few waves will be easy. The really difficult part follows later, when they've gotten a better understanding of us. I trust you've kept studying in your free time?

I was a bit busy trying to catch you, Dallion admitted. Di, how far have you come along?

Good enough, she gave a vague reply.

Knowing her, that probably she had become a second rank novice, but nothing more. Once there was a bit of calm, he was definitely going to have a long discussion to learn why she had left the Learning Hall, not to mention how she'd managed to reach Adzorg faster than him. For the moment, he had to rely on the old man's wisdom and his own strength, and the fury's support to avoid consumption.

Di, you deal with the defense of the group, he said. I'll handle the attacks. We're in a realm, so we'll be able to see each other's markers.

And I, dear boy? Adzorg asked.

Focus on the strategy. Tell me what to do and I'll do it.

It might take a bit too long for you to understand.

As he said that, a thin layer of water formed on Dallion's harp's word. Seeing it, Adzorg casually floated a few feet further away.

I believe that with effort I could think up something that would be possible for you to perform. Remember, we're just an irritant, not their main enemy, so don't go all out.

I figured that out a while back. Dallion waved his aether sword, casting several dozen spells that temporarily increased the traits of everyone present. When do you make a break for the mountain?

Kill off the wave first. Were on the same side, so the vortex will take some time to devise a different solution. During that moment of calm, we go. Ill keep an eye on Di. You, just be ready for anything.

I can keep an eye on myself, the fury said in a sharp tone.

Not here, you cant, Adzorg snapped back, just like Nil used to back when Dallion was learning what it was like being awakened. Some things never changed. Keep close, observe, and try to pick up a few things.

Diroh glanced at Dallion for support.

Dont look at me. His echo did the same to me for centuries. Stay close for now. And focus on protecting you and the old man most of all. Right now, Im of lesser priority.

Chapter 777: Adzorg's Magic

TERMINAL WOUND

Damage dealt increased by 1000%

Purple rectangles popped up throughout the sky like fireworks. The crude flying humanoids exploded in a cluster of magic threads before getting consumed by those unaffected. It was obvious to all that every attack only made the enemies stronger, and at the same time they had no choicethe waves had to be thinned if there were to have a chance.

From everything Dallion had read about natural vortexes, as well as his personal experience, the initial wave was crude, relying on quantity. In the past, that had proved enough to kill off any creature, mages included, foolish enough to find its way inside. Supposedly, the nymphs had been the first to venture inside one and remain alive. The scant pieces of information available in the archmages library suggested that none other than the Starthe original Starhad shared the method of vortex consumption.

Youre leaving too many gaps, Adzorg said.

Before Dallion could provide an explanation, a burst of ice spears flew from behind him, aimed at part of the targets that he missed. Unfortunately, that seemed to have an opposite effect than what was expected.

MAGIC ABSORBED

AETHURCULUS had grown 2 levels.

A cluster of new purple rectangles emerged.

That, dear girl, is precisely why we dont act on our own, Adzorg said with the calm and annoyance of a teacher whod just witnessed a mini science class explosion. Unless we are certain something is effective, we dont use it in large numbers. I thought I had taught you better.

He does it all the time? the fury protested.

Dal is a reckless otherworlder who started out with massive gaps in training and general logic. Do you really want to compare yourself to him?

Di, get my shield, Dallion said, waving his sword along the figure eight.

A trail of spell-circles appeared. All of them launched aether projectiles at the entities that Diroh had made stronger. The attack was enough to drill some of them full of holes, causing them to gradually receive enough damage to unravel. Unfortunately, that didn't prove enough. By the time he did another spark infused line slash, several of the beings had managed to counter it.

Di! Dallion yelled, glancing at her with one of her instances.

Several threads of air reached him, removing the shield from his back and pulling it towards the fury.

Ruby, you too, Dallion whispered. Keep her safe.

Remember, dear boy, this is the opposite of an awakening trial, Adzorg said. They have to kill you.

Doesn't seem that way to me, Dallion tightened his grip round the harpsiswords hilt.

Trust me on this. It was my main field of research.

And the reason were in this mess, Dallion added mentally.

All we need is to survive this. Once we do, there'll be an opening.

The closer the waves got, the faster they became. In his mind, Dallion could see that line and point attacks would no longer be able to do anything. In a best-case scenario, he would destroy a few hundred more before the group was completely surrounded. He could try a multi point attack, or a spark infused music attack, but Harp had warned against it and in this case, he was inclined to agree.

Thick layers of ice emerged, serving as a protective wall for Diroh and the old mage. Held by threads of natural magic, in the real world, they would have stopped a great number of ranged attacks. Here, they merely provided a little more time.

Magic symbols appeared on the blue matter, then were quickly covered by another thick layer of ice.

Better, Adzorg said. Natural magic is easily consumed by vortexes. So, be sure to cover it with spell patterns to make it efficient.

Any advice for me? Dallion asked as he covered his body with a second layer of magic threads. A cluster of mixture threads emerged from the tip of his aura sword as he waved it about, creating his own blend of magic absorption. If he had more time, maybe he could make a sort of absorption dynamo that grew stronger the more it absorbed.

You're already on the right track, Adzorg said in approval, causing the fury and several dozens of Dallions instances to stare at him in surprise. Are you good at spell copying?

Yeah. Despite all the confidence, there was a hint of doubt in Dallions voice. He knew the theory, but in reality, he had only been able to copy the spell of one rogue mage he had been chasing after.

Ill do a fake cast, the old mage said, rubbing his hands. Observe and follow.

What the hell is a fake cast?

The mages fingers danced in the air. They were fast and at the same time deliberately slow enough for Dallion to follow. There were no fake symbols or anti-copy measures that would prevent anyone from learning the actual spell; in fact, there were no magic threads at all, for that matter. All were movements that only a mage could appreciate.

You no longer have the magic

, Dallion thought. Having a large part of his artifacts destroyed had brought him back to his usual level. Judging by the faint glow of magic within Adzorg, Dallion suspected that the old mans trait was limited to ten at most.

Are you keeping up? the mage asked.

Naturally, Dallion replied, even if only a fifth of his instances were. Mimicking the motions was the easy part. Copying the magic thread intensity, that was a whole different story. Concentrating on the old mans fingertips let him see only the faintest of glows more like a hint of what had to be done.

The composition of the spell was strange and magnificent. Out of the hundreds of symbols, Dallion recognized about half. And to think that was without any of Adzorgs countermeasures. Thread by thread, a twelve-circle spell formed, then another linked to it until an entire sphere of magic was in the air.

Youre having me do mage spells? Dallion asked. Should I be flattered?

Flattered by the fact that I dont think youre completely incompetent. If you werent able to copy something, then we might as well just give up now and let the vortex consume us.

A blob of anger appeared behind Adzorgs left eye.

The final symbol in place, the sphere contracted into a marble of magic. In one of his instances, Dallion grabbed hold. In several more, he let it fall to the ground. The latter proved to be a mistake. The marble kept on falling. Upon hitting the ever-changing terrain, it pulled all the threads in a ten-foot radius, consuming them like a black hole of magic.

Dallion would have loved to see more, but the length of his combat splitting remained limited.

Why doesnt it consume me? he asked, switching to the instance that held the marble.

It doesnt harm the magic of the one who created it, Adzorg replied. Needless to say, youre to be careful when using it with others around and never use it outside a vortex.

Great, Dallion thought. Im already cursed, and hes teaching me spells to get me in more trouble with the Moons.

You really dont want me to get rid of my curse, do you? Using his athletic and combat skills, he threw the marble in the thickest part of the attacking rows.

Normally I wouldnt, but vortexes arent considered part of the world. Here, theres a whole range of spells you can use. And I happen to be one of the few that can teach you.

Now a lot of things became clear. Dallion had often wondered why the former archmage was regarded with such reverence. The battle mages were stronger when it came to fighting, with destructive spells that could burn through mountains, while Adzorg was merely exceptional at realm modifications. The truth was that realm modification didn't only mean creation, but destruction as well. It was like having close to unlimited power in a very narrow range of cases. Right here, right now, the laws of the Moons didn't apply, leaving him to take full advantage.

Deed assistance for a second one? the old mage asked with a note of pride as the marble ate through the rows of aether entities. Somethose who had gained a few levels thanks to Diroh attempted to take it on with their own set of spells, only to be consumed in the process.

No, Dallion replied. I think I got it.

Were you able to make any of that out, dear girl? Adzorg turned to the fury.

Part. The faint cluster of blobs within her suggested she was lying. I don't know most of the symbols.

I'd be surprised if you could. Even with a prodigy helping you out, you'll need decades of experience to learn the minimal amount required to unravel what I've achieved. Keep observing, though. This whole experience will be far more beneficial to you than anything the Academy has to offer.

I don't have the magic trait, as everyone keeps telling me. Diroh frowned.

Dear girl, the mage smiled widely. While in a vortex, you don't need to.

Three more pearls of destruction were launched at the incoming waves before the vortex decided to change tactics. Aware that they no longer could win through numbers alone, the entities switched to range attacks.

Bolts, beams, and projectiles washed over the ice layers of protection, dissolving them in places like acid would eat through paper.

Move back! Dallion shouted, trying to take out the enemy casters as quickly as possible. However, it was Adzorg who stepped in, patching up the holes with a new type of spell.

You might want to learn this one too, dear boy, he said.

Already ahead of you! Two of Dallion's instances were constantly observing the man at all times, one even attempting to copy the casting before the splitting time ended.

The intensity of the fight increased. Gritting his teeth, Dallion went back to doing line attacks while simultaneously casting Adzorg's attack spell. Ten of his instances continuously attempted to get the spell done through the aura sword. However, the complexity was more than he could handle.

Don't play around, Adzorg grumbled. What did I tell you about distractions? There will be a time to be creative. Focus on what's important.

Everything is important.

Yes, but you can't see everything yet, just a medium-sized part of it all.

We won't make it the way we're going.

Well be fine.

Old man, I have a mind trait of eighty and Im telling you, we wont make it! If you have another spell to teach me, better do it now!

There was no answer.

Im going to survive this, Dallion shouted. But I wont be able to save you two.

Reluctance was visible, blossoming throughout Adzorgs body. Thanks to his music skill, Dallion could see it as bright as day. The mage had something in mind, but it was a secret he didnt want to share even now.

Give me some of your magic, he said.

What?

Theres no time to teach you this one. I can do it using your magic. Youll have to trust me, though.

Trust him. Nil had asked him the same thing during his time at the Learning Hall. Things hadnt turned out well back then, leading to the war and chaos that was engulfing the world. Was it safe to trust him now? Harp was against it. The nymph guardian hadnt said much since they had entered the vortex, but she was clear on the matter.

A large crack formed through one of the ice sheets. Diroh cast a new one underneath in an attempt to patch things up, but it was obvious to everyone that it wouldnt hold for long. Dallion had to make his decision now.

I hope I dont regret this. He pointed his aura sword at Adzorg. The entire blade turned purple as a cluster of magic threads shot from its tip right at the old man.

Everything was in the mages hands now.

Chapter 778: Static Aether Web

Adzorg wove the threads of magic as if he were a loom. The method had nothing in common with anything Dallion had seen or even read about. The mans left hand moved up and down, aligning the threads while his right moved sideways, creating over a dozen symbols per row. The fascinating part was that while the movement speed of his fingers was five times slower than what Dallion could achieve, the symbols on each line were completed twice as fast.

Keeping up? the mage asked.

Twenty instances were carefully observing what was going on and still it was impossible to memorize it. Mage magic remained in a league of its own.

Meanwhile, more chinks of the vortexs terrain rose up into the air. there it broke up into entities, reinforcing the attackers. These werent the weak humanoids, either. All of them were solid, fully formed beings of magic, very close to the bladerers Dallion had faced in the past. They were missing swords and armor, but made up for it with their spellcraft abilities.

Theyre getting closer, Dallion said, unleashing a series of line attacks.

Dont cast any spells, dear boy, the mage said in his usual calm tone. Shield, kindly cocoon Di, if you will.

What do you The fury began, but before she could finish, the shield enveloped her and Ruby in a ball of metal. The loss of air currents caused it to fall a bit, but with one quick action, the mage cast a levitation spell, without interrupting the weaving process.

This is it, Adzorg said. Better brace yourself, dear boy.

With one final action, the mage merged the threads of symbols together, forming one solid cluster with the shape and dimensions of a walking rod. The feat was impressive by itself, but that was just the beginning. Energy flickered within the rod. Dallion could see symbols flash within, then merge together, creating entirely new combinations. This was no longer drawing schematics; it was closer to watching a chemical reaction: spells creating spells creating spells.

After precisely five seconds, Adzorg tossed the rod up in the air. No sooner had he done so, than the item doubled in size as if something from within had forced it to expand. Flickers of bright purple ran through its surface. Three seconds later, it doubled in size again.

What the heck is that?! Dallion asked.

That is a sign to come close, Adzorg flew to the armadil sphere. Quickly.

Dallion obeyed, having half of his instances join the former archmage. To his surprise, Harp didnt seem opposed in a single case.

Harp, can you copy that spell?

He asked as the rod continued to double in size.

Im not a mage, she replied. But I can make him tell you.

The rod was now the size of a small tower. For a moment, Dallion thought that the goal was to have it pierce through the vortex, allowing them to escape. That didnt happen. Instead, it burst, shooting out millions of threads. Like needles on the end of a line they flew in all directions, piercing any other source of magic in the vicinity. The aether beings that had almost reached the group were first, freezing in space as if they had been struck by music; the ones behind them followed, then the ones behind them. Within seconds, everything in sight was pierced by the threads, but the spell was just getting started. Threads hit the terrain below, ending its constant transformation as well as the chunks levitating towards the sky. Only two things werent affected: the black hole pearls Dallion had cast and anything in his vicinity.

I call it a static aether web, Adzorg said with an indignant expression. Not the best name, but I dont use it very often.

The spell? Dallion asked.

The name. I used the spell plenty of times during my research. You have no idea how many attempts were required to perfect it. Originally, I had hoped I could use it to change the appearance of a realm. I actually got in trouble with the Moons with that. Galatea himself visited me during one session and told me not to mess with things I dont understand.

Let me guess. Dallion looked the mage straight in the eyes. You decided a few years ago to understand what you were doing.

Hes the Moon of magic. He knows the loopholes of reality better than anyone else. If he wanted to tell me to stop, hed have done so and I would have stopped. Thats how I discovered the effect my spell has on vortexes.

Good thing youre the only one who knows it, Dallion thought. Was that the case, though? With all the vortexes expected, what if the battle mages had also acquired some of that knowledge? After all, some of them had served under Adzorg. Even worse, what if that knowledge was part of their deal?

As much as Id love to explain how I managed to create that little marvel, I think it would be a good idea if we left. Calm and adaptation, remember?

Right. Dallion looked around. And I have to keep close, right?

The spell wont harm its caster. The old man turned his head in the direction of the mountain. I suggest heading towards the middle. The foot of the mountain is always a lot more difficult.

How many times have you done this before?

Vortex absorption? Dear boy, one doesnt become an archmage on brains alone.

The threads moved away as Dallion got near. For several minutes, they floated through a jungle of purple and stillness until they reached a part of the terrain that changed form again. Finding himself no longer in danger, the mage moved further away.

You can open up, shield, Dallion said.

The metal sphere did so, returning to its normal form, releasing the fury inside. One would expect her to be furious. Oddly enough, she wasnt. Floating away, she looked at Dallion, then at the jungle of threads behind him.

That was the spell? she asked.

Dallion nodded.

Think I can learn it?

Its not something you should use in the real world, Dallion said. Its not something I should use either.

I shouldnt have become awakened either, the girl countered. But I get your point. Something like that could destroy cities.

More than cities, Dallion thought. It was almost something the Star would use. His focus shifted to Adzorg. So far, it seemed that only otherworlders could become a Star, but was that a definite rule? The old mage was definitely part of that world, but he had made attempts to cross into another. For the length of time during which the device had worked, one could even say he had left the awakening world. Could that mean that he qualified for the role? He had undoubtedly suffered a lot: he had lost his position, become banished, limited by the Order even in the Icepicker guild he had remained a mere captainthe same

position as one of the imperial guards of his facility. It would be understandable if he had obsessed over creating the device to gain what he lacked.

Harp, if it comes down to it, you can take him, right? Dallion thought.

Yes, the harpsisword guardian replied. As long as hes near.

I suggest we hurry up a bit. Adzorg looked over his shoulder. The spell might be impressive, but the vortex is already devising ways to adjust to it. We wont be able to use it again.

But you have a few other spells up your sleeve, dont you? Dallion frowned.

You might say that. Most likely it wont come to that. From here on, the attacks will become more focused. You have shown yourself to be a danger to the vortex. Now its all a matter of determining whether youre worse than the voidlings. Once we breach the mountain, itll be all you, I fear.

Is that a bad thing?

No, just more challenging. Whatever the vortex sends your way wont have the courtesy to wait till I complete a spell.

The journey took longer than expected. Distance within the vortex was a flexible term. Hours would pass with the mountain remaining the exact same size, then without warning, it would grow twice, appearing all the closer. Adzorg explained that had to do with the realm itself being curved. Since neither Dallion nor Diroh had a high enough magic trait to perceive it, from their perspective, they were flying forward, while in real terms, they had been taking giant left and right turns, like following a winding path. To make matters more cumbersome, every now and again, the ground beneath them would erupt like a mini volcano in an attempt to take them out of the sky. Dallions combat splitting prevented that from occurring, but there was no denying that the vortexs aim was getting better and better.

What will happen to the city? Dallion asked as it appeared that the mountain had gotten within reach.

Thats a complicated question, Adzorg sighed. The simple answer is nothing good. Theres no fixing the damage, just delaying it. Provided you manage to absorb the vortex, the city itself might remain intact. The inhabitants, though, thats a different story.

What about the holes in the levels? Wont those be there?

They will, but later. What we experienced is the gleam. Other than us, and anyone foolish enough to have entered the vortex, no one will be harmed in any way. Theyd be terrified, of course. Some of them might have nightmares for a while, but thats all. However, that will change when the real thing occurs. Then, the destruction will take effect. A large part of the city will be punctured and most things will have their magic absorbed, dwarves included.

Even if we absorb the vortex?

Even then. The intensity of the effect will be a lot smaller, but itll still happen. Remember, dear boy, that a gleam is an echo preceding an actual event. Going in early, we can modify things, but the

event will still occur. Same for going in late. Keep in mind, the ripples go both ways as far as time is concerned.

It seemed there was no way around it. A large part of the dwarf capital would be destroyed during a major war between three world powers. And all of that because of Adzorg. Following that logic, did that mean that Dallion would escape the vortex? For the old mage to start the device, creating the vortex as a result, he had to have survived the gleam. Then again, for that logic to work, only Adzorg needed to survive. Diroh and Dallion were fair game.

Since were asking questions, I have one as well, dear boy.

That would be a first, Diroh muttered beneath her breath.

How did you find me?

I got a little help, Dallion replied.

Im not talking about the city. How did you find me in the crowd? You werent supposed to see me.

Being the single human among dwarves stands out.

Indeed, it does. Which is precisely why Id never resort to that. As far as everyone was concerned, I was a dwarf from another kingdom. Yet you seem to have seen me in my true form. Im curious how.

As I said, I had a little help.

It takes more than a little help to see through such illusions. I made certain.

I dont know what to tell you. Lucky, I guess. Dallion tried to laugh it off, but deep inside he had a few concerns as well. Too many things were too perfect. His arrival to the city, finding Adzorg just as he was bargaining for the statue containing the final piece, being able to see him even Diroh arriving at the scene. Something else was in play, and he had no idea who the players were.

In the distance behind him, the jungle of threads vanished from sight. The vortex had adjusted to the spell, rendering it useless. The time of calm was over. Soon theyd have to brace themselves for the second attack.

Chapter 779: Node Point

In vortexes, principles had a far greater importance than the final form. Dallion had experienced a bit of that in the realm of the phoenix feather as well as when invading Aethers realm itself. Compared to the experience now, back then he had been completely blind, considering the retain as firm reality. Now even with just an inkling of magic vision, he could see that form played no role whatsoever. Principles determined everything; they were the things that determined the shape beneath the ever-changing forms that composed a realm.

The mountain wasnt at all a mountain; it was a cone-shaped barrier that divided the rest of the realm from what was inside. Adzorg had described it as a realm within the realm. Each time Dallion of Diroh tried to pry more information from him, he said theyd find out once they breached it. Of course, that was easier said than done. In addition to having minor nuisances pop out and attack the moment they got near, the surface of the cone seemed impenetrable. Dallion had attempted using a few black hole pearls, but to no effect. The barrier had caused them to bounce off to the ground, where they started drilling their way down. Seeing the result, the old mage had shaken his head and made a sarcastic comment that it wouldnt matter anyway once the realm was absorbed.

Nil at his best, the Armadil shield noted in Dallions realm. He does have good advice, though.

We should try further up, dear boy, the mage said. There arent any openings here, either.

Youve been saying that for the last hour. Dallion glanced at him. Why dont we just go to the top?

Normally Id agree, but this isnt a standard vortex. The top will be just as protected as the bottom. Think of it as a bridge with a fort on either side. No matter which side you choose, youll have to fight your way through walls and armies.

The example was quite bad, but it made its point. Of course, it posed the question why would the cone be protected on both ends. In Dallions trial, it was the top of the vortex tower that was the weak spot. In the one beneath Nerosal, it had been the bottom.

Whats so special about this one?

I thought you would have figured it out by now. Adzorg crossed his arms. Slacking off again, are you?

A short distance away, Diroh chuckled.

Well, I suppose you havent had too much experience. Its a double vortex, the old man said. A vortex within a vortex. Quite rare and very sought after.

Theres no such thing. Dallions tone hardened. A vortex absorbs everything inside, or tries to. A vortex within a vortex is just a single vortex.

Ah, youve been reading the notes in the archmages library. The man smirked. Absolute crap. Why do you think I didnt bother getting any of those during well, the events accompanying your training? Just because someone got the title doesnt mean they know whats what.

Clearly. Dallion had no moon for such conversations. How long do we have before the vortex sends its next wave?

Theres still a bit of time.

In the distance, the spot that was the thread jungle had halved in size. The old mans explanation was that the vortex was assimilating it bit by bit. Once it was mostly gone, Dallion could expect another absorption attempt.

Ill be more cautious since were close to the separating barrier. Of course, that doesnt mean we can waste time.

Why dont we split up? Dallion asked abruptly. I know what to look for, and so do you.

The tone was unmistakable. Adzorg opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. A blob the size of a grapefruit appeared within him a blob of regret.

I see, he said after a while. Very well. Ill keep examining this side. You two go around the mountain.

Sounds like a plan.

Dallion looked at Diroh. The fury hesitated for a moment, then joined him. The two flew a short distance away, after which Lux was summoned to give them a boost. After all, despite being a cone, the mountain remained rather large.

Will he be alright on his own? Diroh asked.

Yes. Hes not an old man. Not to mention he was the reason the vortex appeared in the first place; no doubt a result of him meddling with the contraption of his. Hell find a way to call us if hes in trouble. Or if he finds something.

Youve really become cynical.

Wheres Skye? Dallion changed the subject.

Back at Learning Hall pretending to be me, the fury said with pride. It was Cheskas idea. Skye could pull off the shape and Cheska made sure no mage could see the difference.

How did she do that?

She has access to artifacts. Since I only have natural magic, people find it normal when they dont see the standard threads of magic within me.

That still sounded too convenient. Still, that was better left for another day. Even if this was an illusion, Dallion needed its strength.

Examining the cone took a lot of effort and diligence. The most efficient way for Dallion was to resort to instances. It also helped a lot that Diroh was there to serve as backup. The fury had learned from her mistakes and now covered any ice she created with magic symbols, rendering it inedible by the vortex. Meanwhile, he focused on the threads, trying to make out the instructions. Several times he tried to cut through using his harpsisword, but each time the effort proved unsuccessful.

Lux, he said. Go and check how Adzorg is doing.

Sure thing, boss! Without delay the firebird popped away, accelerating to the point that even Dallion couldnt keep track.

Hes always amusing to watch, Diroh said.

Yes, he certainly is.

You told me where you would be, she said.

The same story again. The echo in Dallions realm had already mentioned that to him a few times. The theory was rather sound. It was very possible that Jiroh had convinced the echo he had lent her to give some details. Being a fury, she could get to the dwarf kingdom with time to spare, and also be let inside. Furies werent human, after all. On its own, every single fact had a valid and reasonable explanation. And still, Dallion felt something was off. Nil had taught him not to believe in coincidences, and this was a major one.

Its fine. I know. Dallion did his best to smile. I just wish you would have told me.

Why? So you could forbid me from coming?

Facing Adzorg in one of the most dangerous places in the world isn't a good idea. The only reason your sister hasn't torn my head off is because I haven't slept since you popped up.

That sounded worse than it was. In reality, it had been only a few short hours since Diroh had appeared. Even so, it felt like weeks and Jiroh was going to be furious about it when she learned.

I didn't want you to kill each other.

Di Dallion turned around, then floated closer, placing his hand on her cheek. Whatever happened between me and Nil is in the past. You have nothing to do with it. He was my mentor, my second father in a way, but some things are difficult to forgive.

He knew that she could understand. She had gone through the same with the hunter who'd placed the magic gem within her realm. He too had been like a father, teaching him everything about the world. He had protected her, given her a home, and still he had done something she couldn't forgive even now. Dallion could see all that thanks to his music skill even now.

The fury nodded.

You called him Nil, she said.

Did I really? That's how I think of him sometimes. Anyway, let's get back to work.

A few potential flaws in the cone were found in the next hour. Initially, they seemed like a way in, but after managing to break through using a combination of portal spells and spark cutting, Dallion found another layer underneath. The barrier was clearly a lot more solid than one would expect. Given the level of the vortex, it was no wonder. The spell Adzorg had used to initially get them in was anything but simple.

Meanwhile, it didn't seem that the old man had had any luck later. From what Lux described, he hadn't even bothered making any attempts, just floating about as if on a sightseeing tour. The secret, as he had explained to the firebird, was only to act when there was reason to, never before. That made him either very enlightened or very lazy.

Close to another hour later and purple clouds started gathering on the horizon. It was a safe bet to assume that the vortex had consumed Dallion and Adzorg's spells and now was preparing to absorb them.

I think I saw something weird, Diroh said all of a sudden. That place is knotted. she pointed to a spot on the mountain.

Where? Five of Dallion's instances moved to look.

At first glance, the point she was pointing at seemed as normal as all the rest. However, upon closer inspection, Dallion found that she was right. It wasn't so much knotted as twisted like a sort of hook, keeping two clusters of neighboring threads.

How did you see this? he asked.

It was visible when it turned into a tornado. The fury shrugged. I might not know magic, but I know air.

Air

Think you can use that?

Maybe. Dallion looked closer. The intricacies were too complex for him to make out completely, but it was better than anything else he'd seen. Given that time was running out, it didn't look like there was a better option.

Lux, tell the old man about this, he said in his realm. Then bring him here.

He moved back. The number of instances quickly fell to ten as he stopped examining for other flaws in the cone.

Just go for it, the armadil shield said.

It was a tempting suggestion, although Dallion doubted it would work. The vortex had too much raw power to submit to his.

It took slightly over a minute for Adzorg to pop up. The calm fashion in which he did so suggested that the mage was used to quick acceleration and turbulence, not to mention Lux.

Thanks, Lux, Dallion said instead of addressing the old man. Go back to the realm.

Aww, the firebird chirped in a sad tone. It didn't seem to want to miss the fun. Even so, Dallion didn't want any of his familiars out just yet, especially those who could be easily consumed. If he had a way to place Ruby in his realm, he would have done so.

Where is it? Adzorg asked, apparently not in the mood for pleasantries, either.

Dallion pointed.

Lets see what we have here. Casting an intricate spell with both hands, the mage projected himself into the air, like a magic hologram. It was through it that he flew the five hundred feet to the spot in question.

Spikes shot out from the ever-changing mountain. Some pierced the projection, though to no avail it simply continued on as if they were air.

Did you find it? he the mage turned to Dallion.

Di did.

Ah. That explains it. Its just a node. Not what I would have preferred, but beggars cant be choosers.

Why?

A note is like a stitch up. Think of it as a scab. Actually, no. Think of it as the skin over a blister. Once you pop it a lot of nasty stuff will pour out.

Thanks for the image.

What I mean, dear boy, is that once this is undone, its going to get very messy, no pun intended. Youll have to fly in and fight at the same time.

Wasnt that the plan all along?

Well, I was hoping for a more gradual approach. Once I do this, theres no turning back.

Was there ever? Dallion held both his words.

No. Adzorg replied, then cast the spell.

VORTEX BREACHED

A crater the size of a village formed as the surface of the mountain burst open. Hundreds of aether insects resembling giant wasps poured out along with dozens of chainlings.

Chapter 780: The Vortex Twins

VORTEX MINION

Species: AETHER WASP

Class: MAGIC

Health: 67%

Traits:

- **BODY 0**
- **MIND 40**
- **REACTION 20**
- **PERCEPTION 40**
- **MAGIC 60**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **FLIGHT (Species Unique)**
- **WING SHIELD (Species Unique)**
- **AETHER STING (Species Unique)**

Weakness: STING

Sixty magic? Dallion asked as his swarm of instances did their best to keep away from both creatures and chainlings.

Its just for show, Adzorg replied, not too concerned. Theyre slow, so it doesnt matter much.

So, youve seen them before?

Lets focus on getting through them, dear boy. Therell be lots of time to discuss things once the rough part is over.

The mage had a point. The opening between vortexes was enormous, but even so, it was quickly closing. Threads weaved themselves round the edges, filling them up like a tailor would stitch up a hole.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion led the group, threading the needle through the enemy creatures. The beings were almost without exception focused on each other. The chainlings identified as voidlings

for some reason attacked as one might expect, tentacles and projectiles emerging non-stop from their shapeshifting void surface. The wasps, on the other hand, were a lot more passive and organized. Keeping in clusters and protecting each other with their massive wings, like a Roman turtle formation, they would only dart at a target when surrounded, covering it from all sides then stinging it mercilessly.

Dallion winced. Fighting any of those was going to be unpleasant. Back on Earth, it was said that pulling out the sting of a wasp would lead to its death. Even if true, there was no guarantee that would have an effect here, regardless of what the rectangles claimed.

Di, cast some ice blocks, he ordered. Unprotected ice blocks.

The fury nodded, doing as requested. Large chunks of ice formed behind her. Like pieces of sugar, the pieces of natural magic attracted several of the aether wasps, ignoring the group in the process.

Interesting strategy, the armadil shield said. Not bad at all.

A massive chainling, forty feet tall, suddenly flew in the direction of Dallion. Less than a hundred feet away, it was suddenly swarmed by wasps that were waiting for such an opportunity. Within seconds, the vortex minions covered the invader completely, their aether wings keeping it from the rest of the vortex realm.

Dallion swallowed. If he wasn't careful, the same could happen to him. Green markers appeared, showing the path for him to safely make it through. It felt like flying through an ever-shifting tunnel. On a few occasions, a wasp or two even showed interest in the group, but were quickly dissuaded from further action by a quick zap from Adzorg.

Don't kill any until we make it all the way through, he said.

Aren't we already? Diroh asked.

This is the boundary between vortexes, Dallion explained. Intrusive elements from both are pushed in here to suffocate and slowly be absorbed by the barriers.

Picturesque description. Adzorg smiled. Crude and incomplete, but picturesque.

Old man, just shut up, Dallion thought.

Halfway in through the tunnel between realms, a cluster of threads shot up in an attempt to fill the void. The attempt was unsuccessful, causing the threads to rip and vanish in the process, but it was an indication of what was to follow.

Speed up! Dallion said.

We can't rush these things, the mage argued. Any faster and we'll attract more attention than the voidlings.

Better than getting stuck in between.

Another cluster emerged from the side. This one managed to make it all the way through, creating a thin strand of aether between both sides of the opening. To no surprise, the green markers depicting danger grew larger. Soon, instead of tunnels, there were only bubbles of safeness available.

Not waiting for his companions, Dallion waves the aura sword, boosting their perception and reflexes along with his own. That done, he added a slight speed boost.

I'll create a path, you

I'll create a path, Diroh interrupted. I'm a fury, remember?

Dallion turned towards Adzorg.

She has you there. Even with all your magic, you're no match. Besides, we can see your markers, so she should be fine.

Dallion didn't like the idea one bit. Even if Diroh was a fury, she was too inexperienced when it came to this. It was doubtful her sister had taught her much, and despite the enthusiasm she had shown when fighting Dallion back in Nerosal, there was no way she'd handle a vortex minion, let alone a chainling.

Constantly combat split, he said, flying to the side so she could pass.

Leave it to me. The fury winked as she passed by, taking the lead.

Her combat splitting was laughably weak, even comparing it to Dallion when he first learned how to do it. Diroh struggled to maintain a full second with three instances. One was close to Dallion at all times, while the remaining two sped forward, taking various approaches.

That aside, the fury was going things rather well. Speeding from safe area to safe area, she made a point to avoid anything along her way, while simultaneously using a few air currents to drag Adzorg and Dallion behind. On the few occasions that an aether wasp would show interest, the fury would create a chunk of ice, leaving it as bait. In most of the cases, that worked without issue. In the few that didn't, the old mage would cast a quick zap spell to confuse the creature, resulting in it being stiched by a chainling's tendril.

And yet, despite all the distance the group had passed, in regards to the vortex realms, it was as if they were lordly moving. It was as if they remained stuck in the space between realms, barely inching forward. Rather, it felt that the space they were in was stretched for them, just as the mages made their rooms larger at the Academy.

Threads kept on shooting from the side of the opening, filling in more and more space like columns in a tunnel. Twice Dallion had to interfere, using force splitting to save Diroh from a sticky situation.

We're almost there, dear girl, Adzorg said. Dallion could see that he was lying. Just a few more minutes.

Minutes? Dallion thought. They'd be lucky if they managed to survive even one. Diroh probably felt the same way, for she increased her speed even more. In the real world, this would have allowed her to appear as if she had vanished from a room. Here, not so much.

Cast another jungle, Dallion extended his magic threads through the aura sword.

That'll only attract attention. Then we'll have the real issue to deal with.

The way he said that sent chills down Dallion's spine.

Whats the real issue? he asked.

The glance that he received from the mage screamed, dont ask or youll jinx it. And unfortunately, he did.

In the distance, within the changing reality of the inner vortex, a massive chainling descended from the sky. It wasnt nearly as large as the colossus Dallion had fought, but rather impressive nonetheless. Instead of arms, dozens of tentacles emerged from the sides of its torso, constantly shooting out and skewering multiple wasps at a time. The vortex minions attempted to counter this by clustering together, but the tentacle tips just shattered through their shield of wings, then burst in all directions forming the spikes of a morning star.

Crap, Dallion thought.

A lot of the chainling was for show. If it wasnt for the humongous size, Dallion wouldnt even be worried facing something of that nature. Unfortunately, he wasnt alone, not to mention that the monster wasnt his only opponent. Wasps and lesser chainlings were in abundance. If Dallion were to try and fight the big one, that would leave Adzorg and Diroh to fend on their own.

VORTEX AWAKENING

You are in a level 6 VORTEX

Defeat the guardian to Absorb the VORTEX

Dallion felt as if he were a cork shooting off a bottle of champagne. The opening behind him flew back into the distance, turning into a small dot. He was in an entirely different realm now, identical to the last in almost every aspect. The only difference was the lack of mountains.

What happened? Dallion and Diroh asked simultaneously.

Vortex within a vortex, Adzorg sighed. You really should pay better attention when Im explaining.

The other one was a nine, Dallion said, still trying to wrap his mind around it.

Of course. The reason the second vortex formed was because the first one wasnt able to do its job, namely stop the void from invading the world.

Just like a bandaid on a bandaid, Dallion thought.

Reality here had to be so weak that anything could bleed in: void, colossi, other beings from the banished realm. Did that mean there was a way for him to summon Gleam? Everything else aside, a fully developed spectral shardfly could be quite useful right about now. On the other hand, there was the risk that hed lose her again.

So, to get out, we need to defeat that? The fury pointed as hundreds of aether wasps flew at the massive black creature, stings first.

The vast majority struck it, burying half of their torso in the side of the chainling. Threads of purple spread from the points of impact, covering him like veins. Sadly, that didnt last long. The tentacles on the other side split into dozens, striking the insects in a lethal blow. Hundreds of purple rectangles appeared above the vortex minions, indicating their demise. As soon as that happened, they dissolved along with the aether they were injecting.

Well, at least they weakened him, Dallion thought.

Di, I know you can think logically, so please do so, the mage grumbled at her. The only way to escape a vortex is to absorb it. Tell me, does that creature look like part of the vortex?

The fury remained silent.

Or is it another invader, just like us? he continued, words dripping with sarcasm.

Where is the heart? Dallion asked instinctively. As he did, he already regretted it.

Vortexes of this nature didnt have a heart, they had a guardian. In order to get out, they were supposed to defeat an entity whose realm this was.

Considering that the level six vortex had failed at keeping the void at bay, theyd probably be facing a level nine. That would make it twice as powerful as the last guardian he had faced.

Harp, Ill need your help on this, he said.

Ill be here for you. The harpsiswords strings vibrated. Just not in my full form.

Will you help me use spark music?

Yes. The answer came instantly, without a speck of hesitation.

Suddenly, a line of purple flickered on the horizon. It lasted for a fraction of a second, but Dallion knew precisely what it was.

Look out! he shouted, doing a vertical spark infused line slash of his own.

A force of purple sliced the chainling through the waist in two, then continued in the direction of Dallion. Before it could get near, it clashed with the white line he had sent in an explosion of sound. Both lines of destruction shattered at their point of contact. Dallion felt a strong gust of wind, as the force of the purple line attack flew past on both sides. If he had been a little slower, there was a large chance that Adzorg wouldnt have lost his legs as a result.

Keep close! Dallion said, preparing for another attack.

In the distance, two dots of purple light glistened. A moment later they were gone, replaced by two humanoid beings clad in full plate armor of hardened magic.

TWIN VORTEX GUARDIANS SARIO MURSER, AGENELIN MURSER

Species: HUMAN

Class: MAGIC

Health: 83%, 21%

Traits:

- BODY 90, 60

- MIND 90, 60

- PERCEPTION 90, 60

- REACTION 90, 60

- MAGIC 90, 60

Skills:

- ATTACK

- GUARD

- ATHLETICS

- ACROBATICS

- FORGING

- SCHOLAR

- SPELLCRAFT

Weakness: HEAD

That, dear boy, is the real issue.