Wanderer 341

Chapter 341: [Redacted]

Probably noticing he knew more about the object than they did, the Melodians all looked at Percy eagerly, clearly impatient for an explanation. But he'd rather figure out what exactly he was dealing with before placating them.

'Could it actually be one? It has to be, right?' he wondered, scrutinizing the grey ring with cautious optimism.

Perhaps assuming this little thing was one of the only ninety-nine Rings of Sacrilege in existence – forged out of living gods – was a huge leap of logic. But he couldn't shake off the feeling that this was precisely what it was. The way it transformed the soul mana around it, changing both its colour and its properties… wasn't that how Gabe's blessing worked? And, really, was there a more suitable place to find one of the missing rings than hiding inside the undiscovered Elemental Source of its own affinity?

'But Metatron's book said nothing about them having a will of their own…'

Did the titan not think this was an important detail to mention? Or was this particular ring different from the rest somehow?

Shrugging, he wore the object around his finger, before clenching his fist tightly. At first, he was a little worried it might try to possess him or something – this was the remnant will of a god after all. Yet, he soon realized he was being dumb. If the ring could hijack a mortal's soul like that, it would have long enticed one of the Melodians to wear it instead of running away from them.

'I don't suppose you'll get your filthy hands off me if I ask nicely?' a tired voice rang through his soul, startling both him and his host.

He sounded aged, as if he had experienced both the vicissitudes of time, and the cruelty of his own grim fate. It took Percy a few seconds to overcome the shock of suddenly finding himself connected to a third party, unrelated to his bloodline. Meanwhile, Sol was clearly even more confused than him, but he ignored her for now, focusing on the newcomer.

'Can all the Rings of Sacrilege speak, or is it just you?'

Another wave of surprise slammed into him, but this time it hadn't come from the girl.

'How do you know of that term? All the people here should be ignorant of such matters. Actually, how are you even inside this girl's body?! Is that the effect of a bloodline?'

'Whoa… slow down a little. I asked you first…' Percy said. 'How about this? One of my questions for one of yours.'

The former god remained silent for a while, before eventually taking him up on that.

'I'm not sure. I never saw any of the other rings before that bastard cast his infernal Decree on me… But if I was a betting man – which I very much used to be – I'd say I'm the only one in this state.'

'Because of your soul affinity?' Percy asked.

'It's your turn to answer. Your rules, remember?'

Percy rolled his eyes. The old fox had clearly left his response incomplete on purpose, to bait more information out of him. But he didn't mind playing along. On one hand, he held all the cards here, as the ring seemed entirely powerless to do anything by itself. On the other, he actually felt a little bad about this person. He had no idea what he'd done to get on Svarog's blacklist, but he wasn't sure there was any crime severe enough to warrant spending an eternity trapped inside an object.

'A friend of mine told me about the rings. Not sure it's a good idea to share his identity with you, but he's a god too. And yes, my bloodline allows me to possess dying souls.'

'A god? Friends with a mortal?' the ring scoffed. 'Because of your ability?'

Percy couldn't help but crack a smile.

'Yes, yes and yes. Well, acquaintance might be a better term though.'

‘I guess it’s not that surprising he’d take an interest in you. That’s something I couldn’t have even dreamt of doing at the height of my power. Exiting and entering my body at will? Sure. Even surviving on my own for a while. But this…?’ the entity said, clearly not having realized his gaff.

Percy’s grin only grew wider, however.

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‘I believe you owe me four more answers now.’

The ring grumbled something unintelligible for a couple seconds, but then sighed in defeat.

‘It’s not just my soul affinity. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have retained my sense of self if not for my primary concept – the concept of permanence.’

Percy’s lips curled upwards.

‘I think we both know what my next question is.’

The former deity sent back the mental equivalent of a shrug, before elaborating.

‘The concept of permanence is the one this ring has inherited from me. It’s tied to the soul affinity, so both you and the natives of this planet are eligible to obtain it.’

“Percy, do you mind explaining what is going on?” Doh suddenly asked.

From his and Latt’s perspective, Percy and Sol had gone silent as soon as they put on the ring, so Percy didn’t exactly blame them for getting worried. He said a few words to calm them down, promising to bring them up to speed later. Next, he shifted his attention back to the ring.

‘So, what does this concept even do? I mean… it’s not like I get to be too picky – I doubt I’ll get another chance to obtain a blessing in my life… But it would be nice to know what I’m shoving into my core.’

‘Pour some mana into the ring. It’ll be easier to explain once you get a feel for the mana.’ the entity spat.

He still didn’t sound happy about getting caught, but he probably understood he would be hard pressed to convince a mortal to just give up on such a monumental opportunity.

Percy did as he was told. The soul mana changed upon passing through the object, soon obtaining the same grey hue he’d seen in the lake earlier. Only, it was under his control this time. He’d lost a fraction of the mana in the process, as it seemed the conversion wasn’t perfect, but he guessed that should go away if he internalized the blessing into his core in the future.

The mana itself felt denser. Heavier. Not in the advancing-to-the-next-grade sense though. Nor in the making-his-fused-mana-corporeal way either. It was a different feeling entirely. Perhaps, saying it was more compact was closer to the truth.

‘It won’t help you release stronger attacks, if that’s what you were hoping for. The concept’s effects are indirect.’ the former god said, eliciting a disappointed frown from him.

‘Indirect how? And don’t think you’ll get us to let the ring go by lying or downplaying its effects.’

‘Wasn’t counting on it…’ the entity said. ‘The benefits are passive. By constantly washing your soul in the augmented mana, you’ll enrich it in ways you can hardly fathom. For example, it’ll make it a little more durable, allowing it to sustain more damage before falling apart. In theory, your soul should become less dependent on your body to exist, though I still wouldn’t expect a mortal soul to survive on its own for very long. Then again, this is the first time I’ve seen a bloodline like yours. I’ve no idea how the two will interact.’

Percy felt like rubbing his hands in anticipation already, but the entity wasn’t done, seemingly remembering something else.

‘Ah, it should also let you absorb more spectral fiends. Three instead of one.’

Hearing that, Percy drew a sharp breath. Or maybe it was Sol? It was hard to tell, as both were equally shocked by the revelations.

Having a more durable soul was quite niche, as it would only help them protect themselves from spectral fiends and soul attacks, but absorbing more fiends was a very tangible benefit. Even a single one was valuable beyond belief, and they could get two more? Each? Not to mention what other benefits Percy might get when using his bloodline, though that would require some experimentation.

'Don't get ahead of yourselves. I don't recommend absorbing more fiends until you internalize the blessing. Until its embedded firmly inside your core, the effect on your souls will be temporary.'

As if he got doused by a bucket of cold water, Percy couldn't help but shiver at the insinuation. Indeed, what would happen to him if he were to absorb three traits, only to lose his blessing at some point? Would his soul just collapse upon itself?

Noticing their distress, the god chuckled.

'Listen, internalizing the trait should only take a couple years. Even between the four of you, it won't be longer than a decade. How about I co-operate with you until then, but you let me go afterwards? I have no interest in exchanging hands for the rest of my existence, so I would really appreciate it if you kept me a secret.'

Percy raised an eyebrow. From what he'd been able to piece together, years on Melodia were a little longer than those on Remior, but this was still a very reasonable timeframe. Sadly, he wouldn't be able to get the new traits in time for his battle with Acton, nor did he expect the Holy Child to fire any soul attacks at him, so it didn't look like the ring would benefit him much before then.

But he very much intended to walk out of the Thirsty Valley alive and with all of his companions with him, so the priceless artifact would no doubt prove indispensable at the time.

However, what he did with it wasn't solely up to him. First of all, the ring had a soul of its own. He didn't know if its owner had been a good person or not, or whether he deserved his predicament, but he didn't want to come to a decision without consulting with him.

And he also had to discuss this with the Melodians. All things considered, he'd found the ring on their planet, and with their help. This would have never been possible without them sharing information about the Mirror Lake and the grey blot, or the countless sacrifices they'd made to get here. Certainly not without possessing Sol's body.

What happened moving forward was something that all five of them would have to agree on.

'I'm Percy and the owner of this body is Sol, by the way. The two guys over there are Doh and Latt. I imagine you have a name too?'

'Ah… a name… what a privilege it is… to speak it again… a few thousand years more, and I might have even forgotten it…' the god replied, some genuine amusement seeping through their connection.

'…I'm Zoris.'

Chapter 342: Zoris

Percy was about to speak, to brief Doh and Latt on what he'd discovered about the ring, when Zoris stopped him.

'Were you seriously going to talk to them again? With your mouth? Like a caveman? You're telling me you regularly jump across bodies, possessing people entire worlds away, but you don't know about basic soul communication?'

'Soul communication? Like the connection between me, you and Sol?' Percy asked, ignoring the god's insults.

He got a mental nod back.

'You mean… it's possible to do that even without my bloodline?' Percy asked again.

'Well, not from afar, since no mortal should be capable of freely abandoning their body, and even gods with a soul affinity like me wouldn't be able to enter another person's. But you can establish a temporary link with anybody through skin-to-skin contact.'

Percy frowned, feeling a strange mixture of excitement and regret. This was something he hadn't even considered to test before. His bond with his hosts and Micky was so convenient… They could freely share thoughts and images with one another, allowing for quick and discreet communication. But he'd always simply assumed this was a feature of his bloodline, not something that could be accomplished without it.

If only he'd known this before… It would have been handy on so many occasions. Whenever he was trying to describe a complex enchantment to Nesha, or when he was trying to share his insight on Circulation with the girls, or when he was briefing his companions on his clones' travels. Hell, Orin's lessons would have been so much easier to digest too.

He sighed.

'Like a caveman indeed…'

Walking up to Doh and Latt, he asked them to place a hand on each of his shoulders. Zoris did explain how this was meant to work but, honestly, he didn't have to. Now that he'd planted the idea in Percy's mind, it wasn't hard for him to figure it out by himself.

'Normally, it takes some practice to learn, even for a soul user. But I doubt that will be necessary for you.' Zoris said.

Percy nodded. He was already used to severing chunks of his soul and moving them around his host's bodies. It was a bit like discovering a new muscle group that others didn't even know they had. His control wasn't as precise inside his main body as it was with the wisps he sent out, but it shouldn't take him long to get better at that too.

In any case, this was good enough for now. Allowing his wisp to stretch to Sol's shoulders, he moved it as close to her skin as possible. It was harder to extend it outside her body, and the others didn't seem to have as much awareness of their souls as him, so they couldn't copy his action.

Drawing some mana from Sol's cores, he allowed it to accumulate in her shoulders, forming a bridge between everyone's souls. Just like that, he felt two more people connect with him.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Soul-to-soul – Crude!]

Next, he took a few minutes to bring everyone up to speed on Svarog's tale. He explained what the Rings of Sacrilege were, before moving on to the information that Zoris had shared.

It was a bit funny actually, watching their expressions jump from curiosity to surprise and elation… even horror at times. By the end, the poor Melodians were staring at the ring with a blend of caution and respect. Not that he blamed them – since the object contained the remnant will of an ancient god. One that had very likely predated their entire civilization, and even saved their ancestors once.

Of course, Percy's 'lecture' hadn't gone without its hiccups either. At one point, they'd been interrupted by a small herd of beasts, forcing them to take a few minutes to eliminate the pests. After that, Latt had even let slip of Metatron's name, much to Percy's dismay. Unlike Percy and – to a lesser extent – Sol, the other Melodians didn't have much experience keeping their thoughts and emotions from spilling through the bond, so it was no wonder the Yellow-born had failed to keep the information to himself.

Alas, the damage was small. It turned out, Zoris didn't even know about Metatron or the Vault. Apparently, the artificial world hadn't been created yet during his time. And it wasn't like the fallen god had the means – or even the intention – of reaching out to the callous titan. His best bet was probably to remain on Melodia, hiding in a corner of the universe void of divine politics – just like he had done until now.

'Girl, I've been meaning to ask. What's up with your trait? I recognize everyone else's, but not yours. Did you absorb some new kind of fiend?'

'I got it from Percy.' Sol said, having mostly remained quiet up to that point. 'I was trying to absorb a fiend when he entered my body. It doesn't do much, other than letting me call him back to Melodia… Sometimes. Although, I guess that's plenty, everything considered.'

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'How curious…'

The god fell silent, seemingly pondering over her words, but that didn't last long.

'Lord Zoris…' Doh said, jumping into the conversation. 'May I be so bold as to ask how you ended up like this? What brought you to our world?'

The former god sent a mental shrug back.

'It's not that complicated a story. I'm still not entirely sure why that asshole did this to me, to be honest. I was Svarog's rival, and we did fight several times over various resources in the past, but that's just part of being a god. It was never personal. The worst thing I ever did to him was when I won a rather precious treasure the two of us were competing for… But that's still no reason to hunt me down like an animal and do this to me. I guess he snapped when his family got murdered, causing him to go on a rampage against anybody who'd ever looked at him funny.'

He chuckled, but it was hollow. Even now, it seemed that Zoris had trouble accepting the stupidity of it all.

'Anyway, I was "lucky" that he got besieged by a bunch of angry gods. Well, they were more greedy than angry, I suppose. Falling into their hands wouldn't have been much better for me. Fortunately, I was able to slip away amidst the chaos, drifting through space for countless years. Eventually, I felt the Mirror Lake's calling. That's actually the funniest part of the story. I've searched for this place my whole life, only to fail like countless others before me… To think I'd only find it after being reduced to this…'

Percy's heart clenched as he felt the undisguised bitterness in the god's soul. That said, he wouldn't mind getting Nesha to examine the truthfulness of his words if he got the chance. It was entirely possible the man was lying to their faces to elicit their sympathy, or to conceal something important. At least, he didn't feel confident in seeing through the acting skills of such an ancient being.

'For all I know, this might be the one who butchered Svarog's mortal family, only to turn around and play the victim now that he got punished…'

In any case, the others seemed more willing to take him on his word.

‘Whatever circumstances brought you to us, I must thank you on behalf of my people.’ Doh said, bowing politely. ‘Regardless of your motivations, the fact that you taught us how to absorb the spectral fiends is the only reason we are alive today.’

‘Save your gratitude, kid.’ Zoris said. ‘I never much cared about your people. I wouldn’t have even risked showing myself to your ancestors if I hadn’t been confident I could escape from them. I only shared the technique with them because I wanted them to cut the fiends’ numbers down. Their population is increasing too fast, and it’ll be a problem for me sooner or later. Sadly, it was only ever meant to be a temporary solution. At first, your people did absorb many of the fiends around the planet, improving the situation… But you eventually attracted even more of them by injuring your souls and inviting them in. You’ve only bought me a millennium or two at best. Today, I was planning to ask you to start actively destroying the fiends for me, but I didn’t expect to stumble upon a monster faster than a Green-born…’

And there it was. The confirmation of Percy’s earlier guess. Openly collaborating with the Melodians would have potentially allowed them to cleanse the planet of both the beasts and the spectral fiends. But Zoris would have risked getting captured by them, only to be treated as a precious heirloom to be passed down among their Green-borns and Yellow-borns forever.

‘So, what’s your goal anyway?’ he asked, still unsure about the former god’s intentions. ‘Do you just want to survive for as long as possible by yourself until the fiends eat you? Doesn’t sound like much of a life.’

This time, Zoris’s soul flared up with genuine irritation though.

‘As if! What kind of loser would settle for such a pathetic existence? I’ll have you know, one doesn’t become a god by giving up at the first setback! I’ve never stopped looking for a way to restore myself to my former glory!’

‘You mean… it’s possible to reverse Svarog’s Decree?!’

‘Who knows?! Nobody thought a Decree like that could exist, until that bastard went ahead and proved everyone wrong! This is what it means to push the frontier of magic farther – to fight against what is possible! That is the hallmark of a true titan – not those pathetic copycats who merely create new variants of the same old, same old!’ he replied, his voice oozing with fanatical passion.

Now that, Percy could relate to. At the end of the day, wasn't he the same? Everyone told him it was impossible for him to attain divinity, yet he'd sooner die than accept that grim forecast.

But Zoris wasn't done.

'Anyway, I couldn't exactly reveal myself to another god to ask for help, so I figured studying the Mirror Lake was as good a bet as any. And that's what I've been doing ever since I landed here. Sadly, my research has yet to yield any results. It doesn't help that I can't even manipulate mana properly… Ah, what I'd give to have even a shitty, mortal, mana core again… No offense.'

Percy frowned.

'I definitely sympathise with the not giving up part, but have you considered trying something different? You don't even have that much time left, by your own admission.'

'What other option do I have?' the god scoffed. 'These people can't even advance to Blue. Hell, none of them even has a life affinity. What are the odds of them helping a god rebuild his body? As for the fiends… Well, I'm not looking forward to this place getting overrun, but I suppose I'd just leave if things started looking dangerous, searching for another place to continue my research.'

Hearing Zoris's words, Percy briefly considered offering to help him. But even if Zoris hadn't been a complete stranger, he didn't know if he could turn him into a familiar. The god wasn't just a disembodied soul – he was a Ring of Sacrilege, the product of a Decree. Could he even break him free of that state?

'It might be something to consider in the future.'

This wouldn't just be an act of kindness. Turning a former god into a familiar might bring him all sorts of benefits, so he wouldn't rule it out completely. But he'd rather get the blessing first, and verify that Zoris was trustworthy before even floating the idea.

For now, everyone's motivations were about as clear as they could be – at least until he brought the ring to Nesha. Percy knew he couldn't stay on Melodia much longer, so it was time to decide who would keep the ring, and under what terms…

Chapter 343: Leaving Melodia

‘Percy should take the ring first. It would be nice if he could give Sol a go after he is done. Then, we can return it to the lake.’ Doh said, getting a nod from Latt.

‘What about you?’ Percy asked, finding this a little too easy.

The Green-born shook his head before elaborating.

‘If it was just an inanimate object, I wouldn’t have minded bringing it home and sharing it with the other Green-borns. The extra boost could help us protect our country. But I don’t want to disrespect Lord Zoris’s wishes, and I can’t guarantee the others will be willing to let the ring go. I also can’t justify being the only one to get the blessing. It would just be hypocritical of me.’

‘What about me? Why should I get a go?’ Sol asked.

‘Many reasons.’ Doh said. ‘First, you don’t have a proper trait. Not that yours is bad, but you can’t even do anything with it unless Percy can pick up your signal. It would be nice if you could obtain more means of protecting yourself. After all, you are easily the most important person on Melodia right now. You are our sole connection to Percy, and the only one who knows the complete Dance. You have to survive at all costs.’

Percy felt some heat gather on his host’s cheeks, but he didn’t disagree with the Green-born’s assessment of her in the slightest. He still wasn’t sure he deserved to get the ring first though.

‘Wouldn’t it be more practical for Sol to hold it for now?’ he asked. ‘It might help you return home.’

‘It won’t. Lord Zoris made it clear she shouldn’t absorb another trait until she internalizes the blessing. We’ll be back a lot sooner than that. The only benefit would be protecting her from the fiends, but there won’t be this many once we leave the lake. Her boosting art and the runes you’ve carved for us are plenty for that.’

‘You’re the one who caught the ring. None of us would have managed without you.’ Latt pitched in. ‘You should go first. It’s the least we can do to thank you.’

‘You understand you risk losing the ring forever, right? I might die before I can return it. If not while leaving Melodia, I might get killed back home.’ Percy said.

While he’d done everything he could to defeat the Holy Child, he was under no delusion that it would be an easy fight. It would be irresponsible of him to not inform the Melodians of the dangers.

Doh chuckled.

‘It’s not like our journey will be any safer. Just like you, we’ve done everything to raise our odds, but whether we’ll succeed remains to be seen.’

‘What about you, Zoris? Are you okay with this arrangement?’

‘Sure, why not. I was very much looking forward to taking a pointless roundtrip through the cloud of fiends, only to spend some time on a lesser spring teeming with greedy gods, away from my research.’ the god replied, his voice oozing with sarcasm.

Then, he sighed, assuming a more serious tone.

‘But whatever… To be honest, I thought I was done the moment you captured me. The fact that you’re willing to let me go once I’ve given the blessing to a couple of people is better than I had expected. As for the fiends? Well, you did break through the blockade three times already with Orange mana and without even knowing what you were up against, so I suppose we’ll be fine… You’ll owe me one after this, however.’

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Percy didn’t attempt the trip until two days later. He wanted to practice his spells with Sol a few more times, and to ensure that everyone got a proper rest before leaving them to their fate.

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Zoris even guided Doh into applying a barrier around Percy's wisp – not too dissimilar to what Sol's father had done for him the last time he was here. None of the Melodians in the group was that familiar with that school of magic, but it wasn't that complicated a spell, apparently. The Green-born had volunteered to cast it, as his mana was by far the densest. He'd even used the ring to augment it with the blessing.

Next, he'd passed the artifact to Sol, who also fed her mana through it. The conversion efficiency was poor, but it didn't matter, as she had a lot more mana than Percy could fit into his wisp anyway. She helped him pump his soul full of Yellow mana. Sadly, Doh couldn't assist him with this part, as Percy wouldn't be able to attach his willpower to the Green mana without access to the man's core. ŘÁNôB Ë

By the time they were done, Percy's wisp was a veritable fortress of soul mana – a grey orb about the size of a grapefruit thrumming with Yellow mana, encased in a slippery shell a grade higher. Inside his soul, a dull grey ring was floating.

Percy had considered storing it inside his spatial seal, but he wasn't sure it was possible, as it possessed a soul of its own. Even if he could do it, he didn't want to leave Zoris trapped in there, in case he perished.

'Sol, remember to use your trait regularly once you return home. I won't be able to find you otherwise.' he said, getting a nod back.

One mystery they had yet to solve with any certainty, was why he had failed to detect her signal for so long. Whatever the exact reason was, they guessed it would be much easier the next time. Sol now had a second core and a stronger soul. Not to mention the Dance, pushing her strength to the next level. Meanwhile, Percy would be advancing to Yellow soon, and his boosting art was also more potent. Whether it was the sender or the recipient of the signal who mattered the most, it shouldn't take as long to establish another link.

He wished everyone good luck with the fights to come, as the Melodians thanked him for all his help. Then, he finally severed his connection to his host, his soul ablaze with determination.

He would survive. They both would, and then he'd bring her the ring back. A couple years' worth of Aurora Dew too, hopefully. Not enough for her to share with her people, or for her to drink forever, but at least to get her cores to Green.

Sol was more than his cherished friend.

She was also his only access point to the Mirror Lake. The Elemental Source had already helped him tremendously, and he might need it again in the future. Of course, he'd never dare reveal its existence to anyone, let alone using it as a bargaining chip against the gods. The Melodians deserved better than that.

But that didn't mean he couldn't use it to train his own magic.

Suffice to say, extending the girl's lifespan and giving her an even louder voice among her people was a no-brainer. Eventually, it would be nice if he could establish an alternative means of reaching the planet though. If he was to truly reach godhood one day, the Mirror Lake would be an indispensable asset.

Alas, this was an issue for later.

Right now, he had to defend himself against the hungry swarm that piled upon him with even greater fury than the last couple of times. Was it just bad luck, or was it the ring hidden in his soul that attracted the fiends?

He didn't know, but he hadn't made it this far to get eaten by the creatures.

Doh's barrier helped a lot. It fended off many more attacks than Mi's had and it had yet to shatter. But the fiends kept coming. This time, Percy counted over twenty attempts to breach his defences. Gritting his non-existent teeth, he prepared some of the Yellow mana, ready to unleash a burst of needles on the first fiend to attack after his shell was gone.

That moment never came, however.

In the end, the attacks grew less frequent, halting entirely while the shield was still up. Percy waited patiently, unwilling to let his guard down until he was certain he was in the clear. More minutes passed as he drifted through the endless darkness. He had probably travelled a monumental distance already, his main body pulling him faster than ever before. Only then did he allow himself to relax a little, guessing he'd made it out.

'It was overkill anyway.' Zoris suddenly said. 'Honestly, the fiends aren't that dangerous… If you aren't a mortal at Orange, or a ring without a mana core…'

Percy felt the urge to chuckle, knowing his new friend was right. Despite all his gains over the years, he was still weak. To the true forces standing at the peak of the universe, he was an asset at best, much like Zoris. At worst, he was a bug that could be squashed under one's thumb.

But there was no doubt he had improved a lot too. Before discovering his bloodline, he hadn't even been able to fight against a Red goblin. By the time he escaped the Alchemists' Guild, he had been able to hold his own against any Yellow on Remior. Before leaving Bogside Town, he'd slain a couple of Greens.

'And soon, I'll take down my first Blue.'

On top of that, he had several avenues to continue growing stronger – courtesy of his clones. A blessing, two new spectral traits, and whatever he and Micky could achieve together after they got rid of the crow's oppressor. There was also his ongoing project with the mana threads, and his ambitious goal of claiming a wasp egg.

Percy would have grinned if he had a mouth.

'I wonder how easy it'll be to squash me… a couple more years from now.'

Chapter 344: Yellow

With a satisfying click, the Yellow strands inside Percy's core snapped together, forming a dense blob of mana. Relieving the organ of the accumulated pressure, the magical substance then splashed onto its base, filling the core by about a third of its volume.

Taking a few deep breaths, Percy absorbed more ambient mana over the next few minutes, soon filling his reserves to their new capacity. At the same time, waves of euphoria rushed over his body, cleansing it of the accumulated fatigue. His muscles swelled with strength as his senses grew sharper, and his thoughts clearer. Even his soul felt more sublime than before – a small detail that other mages wouldn't have easily noticed.

'Finally…' he exhaled in relief once he was done.

It was a little nostalgic, having the core in his sternum advance for the first time since forever ago. Hadn't his journey truly begun as soon as he reached Orange? That was what had allowed him to discover his hidden bloodline, and to start searching through the cosmos for ways to get stronger.

As for his second core?

Not there yet – it would be a few more months until it caught up.

Percy wasn't the only one who had advanced either. Micky had been the first, his second core reaching Yellow a couple years ago, thanks to his head start in the Valley. Not long after that, Nesha made it to Green with her first core. As for Elaine, she was still a few months away from Blue, though she'd probably get there before Percy's second core hit Yellow.

And the moment Percy was done with his promotions would be the time to confront Acton's group. Well, maybe a couple days after that, to give him a chance to get used to his new strength.

They certainly couldn't afford to wait for the girls' second cores to advance. As much as that would have helped – Elaine's in particular – their next promotion was years away. They had neither the time nor the Aurora Dew to stay here until then.

An unexpected piece of good news had come with Micky's advancement. The crow was a little more resistant to the Holy Child's commands now. He still couldn't defy his orders, but he could hold on for a couple seconds before the pressure forced him to comply.

It wasn't a huge change, but it was a sign that he might even escape Acton's control entirely upon getting to Green. This hadn't happened yet – despite the countless powerful beasts he had devoured over the years – but Percy guessed it had to be close.

Unfortunately, this wasn't something they could rely on. Leaving aside the uncertainty of it all, it wouldn't solve their problem completely. Sooner or later, the Holy Child would reach Violet, allowing him to capture Micky again. No matter how they thought about it, their only option was to get Acton out of the picture for good.

"Congratulations Percy!" Elaine said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

She crushed him in a bear hug for a couple seconds, before letting Nesha give him a peck on the lips.

"I miss Synchronization already." Percy said, looking at his girlfriend.

That only earned him a painful pinching on his waist, however.

"Making fun of me now?" the girl grimaced. "You'll be able to use it again much sooner than me. Besides, you've got a better boosting art now."

He shrugged, not arguing with that. It had been years since he registered the Dance. He was already proficient enough with the spell to not only use it while fighting, but also while using Circulation with his other core.

Sadly, he had yet to figure out the soul component of the spell, so he couldn't truly merge the two entries. His clone had been gone for ages, so he did hold out hope that his counterpart would stumble upon some insight on the planet full of soul users. That said, he had mentally prepared himself for the possibility of facing Acton like this.

"Anyway, I'll go stretch my limbs for a few hours. I need to get used to my magic again." he said, leaving the girls behind as he searched for a Green beast.

Luckily, he didn't have to walk far. Soon, he spotted a massive python. It was dozens of metres long, its girth wider than a horse even without stretching its maw open. It probably weighed dozens of tons too, judging from the deep grooves it left in its passing. Its scales shone in a pale emerald colour under the dim glow of the azure dome. As for its eyes, they glinted a few shades deeper – like a pair of polished sapphires – its slit pupils staring at him with unconcealed hunger.

Cracking his knuckles, Percy drew a series of deep breaths, pumping mana into his channels. It didn't take long for the two instances of Circulation to take effect, but he didn't stop there. Cyan ribbons extended out of his skin, greedily absorbing more mana from his surroundings. If one looked closely, they'd quickly notice these were actually elongated whirlpools, spinning rapidly as they attracted and converted the ambient mana to his own.

A second set of silver ribbons stretched out of his soul. These were attached to the maelstrom swirling around his sternum, rotating alongside it. His newfound control over the soul mana allowed him to keep them in place a few seconds longer, but they still fell apart fairly quickly, causing him to click his tongue in annoyance.

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'Figures… It's not something that a simple promotion can fix… There has to be some trick I'm missing…'

Not waiting for him to ponder over his failures, the colossal snake lunged at him with shocking speed.

Percy sidestepped the attack with relative ease. His body felt a little unfamiliar, as he had yet to get used to his new strength, though the advancement had still placed him solidly above his previous capabilities.
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He could have made quick work of the creature if he wanted, but he had plenty of spells to test. Going through the list in his Status, he tried one thing after another, carefully observing how his power-up had affected his magic. It sucked that he'd have to do this again before the year was over, but he couldn't just slack off and leave himself defenceless until his second core caught up.

As expected, most of his spells had grown stronger to various extents. Even the ones that didn't have anything to do with soul mana directly, such as his Greater Foresight and his Grim Dance, had still benefitted from his increased speed and sharper senses.

However, Percy noticed another thing he wasn't particularly thrilled about.

His unbalanced promotion had messed up more than just Synchronization. Since first mastering affinity fusion in the Guild, this was his first time trying to use it with his cores out of whack. Once again, he got to experience all the frustration Gabe had to deal with.

He could still do it, but it wasn't as effortless as it had been before. He had to hold back his superior soul mana, and gather a lot more pure mana to make up for its lower grade. Even when he collected the right amounts, actually aligning the two substances was tough, and the end result wasn't as stable.

'I guess there's no point in reforging my constructs for now.'

He shrugged.

It could have been worse. At least, his cores were less than a year apart. He sure didn't envy all the others he'd given the Decree to. Many of them would have to spend over half a decade in this transitionary state following each advancement.

Next, he watched the snake slither away in defeat. The poor creature had clearly realized it was outmatched by now. Percy didn't bother chasing it, guessing it wouldn't be long until another beast attacked him.

Sure enough, his second sparring partner showed up just minutes later. This time, it was an oversized tiger with needle-like fur. Though its colours were inverted, its orange stripes striking a ferocious pattern against the darker backdrop. It was stronger than the python too, but Percy didn't have much trouble avoiding its attacks.

That said, his mind wasn't in the fight.

He was still thinking about his boosting art. While he wasn't confident he would figure out the soul component of the Dance in time, that didn't mean he'd given up. Unlike Micky's people, he had more avenues to improve upon the technique.

A few months ago, Percy came up with an idea, embarking on a different journey entirely. One he hoped would yield tangible results sooner.

Fusing some mana outside his body, he formed a teal shroud around his skin. Next, he allowed the imperfect silver ribbons to dissolve entirely, focusing solely on the pure component of the Dance for now. Turning the teal mana corporeal, he poured it into the whirlpools, allowing his boosting art to pull it into his body. And soon, something changed.

The cyan ribbons turned teal!

Even the cyan lines branching out of his abdomen started to shift colours, though there was a gradient to it this time. Closer to the extremities of his body, the lines were teal, as his channels were full of fused mana. As they approached his core, they turned completely cyan.

The concept behind this trick was simple, yet the execution wasn't.

Soul mana wasn't a common affinity, so the fusion between his two mana types was an inherently unstable one. Percy wouldn't be able to find anything similar in nature, which was why he only had two sets of mana channels, unlike Micky and potentially Gabe, who could open a third one.

After all, there was no such thing as a "teal affinity".

Yet, that didn't mean it was impossible to pump his fused mana through his body. It had two primary states – corporeal and ethereal – corresponding to his two affinities. Depending on which state it was in, it behaved much like either of its components. Well, he could also control the visibility of the mana, but that didn't affect the way it travelled through his body.

Since he couldn't figure out how to use the Dance with soul mana, Percy had decided to cheat, by sneaking some soul mana into his pure channels!

Normally, he was only meant to use the whirlpools as an extension of his pathways, pulling and converting ambient into pure mana. Now, he was also emptying his soul channels outside his body, to

make space for more. Mixing it into the whirlpools, he was able to store a more compact energy source in his pure channels.

Even better, this approach held a lot of potential, as it was fully compatible with what he might do in the future. Once he figured out the soul component of the spell, he should be able to do something similar with it, pumping incorporeal fused mana into his soul channels. If everything worked out, he might even be able to directly convert the ambient mana into fused mana, bypassing the extra steps, to raise the spell's efficiency.

'If only it was that easy…' he slouched, putting the tiger out of its misery with a swift slash of his scythe.

As novel as this approach was, it wasn't without its issues. His cores and their corresponding extensions wanted to convert the ambient mana into their own affinity – not into Percy's fused mana. Like two stubborn siblings that refused to share their toys, his cores tried to cleanse the teal mana of outside influence as it circulated through his body. The one in his abdomen tried to turn his fused mana back into pure mana, getting rid of the soul component entirely.

Percy had to put additional effort to prevent that from happening. But he couldn't just stop his cores from doing their job, because he still needed them to convert the ambient mana. In other words, he had to somehow convince his core to cherry pick what it converted.

Suffice to say, this was still a work in progress, but the ceiling of his boosting art was clearly a lot higher than it had been for Micky's people.

'Well… Difficult or not, it's probably the best I'll be able to do in the little time I have left.'

Not letting himself get depressed by the setback, Percy dove back into his training, intent on raising his strength as much as possible.

Luckily, it seemed he hadn't been working on his spells alone. A couple weeks later, his clone finally returned, bringing with him things that could shake the very foundation of Remior if they leaked…

Chapter 345: Bloated list

A grey comet slammed a few inches below Percy's chest, his wisp trying to burrow into the tiny hole in his soul. It was having some trouble since the injury had mostly healed over the years, leaving only a

faint scar behind. That said, it would have squeezed in already if it had been just that – Percy's soul would have retracted a little inward to make space for it.

There was another problem, however.

Looking at the clone, Percy noticed there was an object hidden inside it. Well, two of them actually, but the spatial seal had no trouble passing into the rest of his soul, as it didn't have to interact with his flesh. Meanwhile, the second item exhibited a dual nature – it could touch both his soul and his body, so it appeared to be blocked by his skin.

Soon, a rush of memories flooded his mind, making him dizzy. The clone had spent months on… Melodia… From his perspective, at least. There was a lot to take in, and just the bits and pieces at the forefront of the clone's thoughts were almost enough to give him a heart attack.

But Percy shoved everything aside for now, still having the clarity of mind to clasp the object in front of his chest with both hands, not giving it a chance to slip away. The clone's mana was holding it in place for now, yet he couldn't afford to allow an accident to occur.

Only after he had worn the ring on his finger and clenched his fist tightly did the wisp finally meld into his soul, attaching itself to the rest.

'Paranoid much?!' Zoris's aged voice rang through his mind, laced with irritation. 'You really think I'd try to escape after all that? I'm not even sure I can find the way back to the lake on my own…'

Percy shrugged, not fully trusting the elder. The others noticed the commotion, soon gathering around him. Their eyes scanned him with concern, before landing on the grey ring.

"Has your clone finally returned?" Elaine asked, getting a nod back. "Man, this one has been gone for years! Anything good?"

Nesha remained quiet, but she looked no less curious than his cousin.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose with his free hand, he took a couple minutes to sort through the most important things.

The strange reunion… the recovery of his memories… a trek through a bright forest… endless battles… countless losses… an Elemental Source… a storm of sickles... a dance of silver flames... and, of course, a Ring of Sacrilege.

He frowned, trying to decide what to share and what to leave behind. Percy was usually pretty open with the girls about his secrets, since he trusted both of them with his life. But the ring… the lake… those weren't just his secrets. If they leaked at some point, it wouldn't just be Percy paying the price. It would be all of Melodia.

'I guess I should just tell them about my spells and keep the rest vague. I'll return the ring as soon as I get the blessing, and I'll never speak about it again.'

For anyone who wondered where his blessing had come from, he'd have to make up a story. Not that he felt confident in coming up with a believable alternative for something this big, but it wasn't like people could locate Melodia without his help. If it was that easy, the Mirror Lake would have been discovered eons ago.

In any case, if he got captured by the Divine Order he was screwed anyway, so it was mostly Metatron he had to worry about. The titan was bound to notice the altered qualities of his mana, so it might be a good idea to learn to suppress them before returning to the Vault – if possible. Even if it wasn't, he would still take the risk. This wasn't the kind of opportunity he could afford to let slip.

"Plenty of good things." he ultimately said, a grin forming on his face.

Taking a few deep breaths, he activated Circulation with his soul core, but he didn't stop there. Carefully recalling his actions by the Mirror Lake, he expelled some mana from his channels, allowing it to swirl into a bunch of silver yarn balls floating next to him. Igniting them took a few seconds, since he wasn't used to doing it without the Source's help, but the constructs eventually lit up in a cascade of flames, dancing playfully around his sternum, spiralling in and out of the maelstrom.

"You got it?!" Elaine asked, her voice a mixture of excitement and bitterness.

He knew she was happy for him, but she hadn't hidden her own frustration over the years, after failing to complete her own version of the boosting art. So far, she had merely copied him, extending a bunch of azure whirlpools from her channels, but she had no idea how to tailor them to her affinity. It wasn't as bad as his soul mana, since the pattern on her skin was static at least, but her version of the spell wasn't much better than Circulation yet.

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"Did it register?" Nesha asked, her voice a little calmer.

She was also interested, as Percy had shown her the spell too, but she was even farther behind than his cousin at the moment. She'd started working on it later, and she had two affinities to worry about. One was rare like his own, so she'd probably have to overcome even more obstacles than Elaine to make it work. The other should be simpler, but it wouldn't play as central a role in the upcoming fight due to her second core's lower grade.

"It did! It's funny actually… This is my first time registering the same spell twice."

Opening his Status, Percy checked the spell section, curious to see the changes.

___

Spells:

___

'Okay, I guess it makes sense it only got listed once.'

It appeared Phoebe's Decree was a little smarter than he gave it credit for. It seemed to recognize it was the same spell, even if there were some differences from one affinity to another.

Percy had wondered at times how his Status decided what to name his spells. His own knowledge and intentions were clearly taken into account, to an extent. If not, it wouldn't have retained the same names that Micky's ancestors had used. If he had first learned the spell on Felmara, it might have registered as "Mana Flow" instead. If Percy really wanted a spell to be called something specific, he was confident his Status would honour his wishes.

Then again, the titaness had clearly built some creative freedom into her Decree, as he was pretty sure things like "Spiritforged Effigy" hadn't sprouted solely out of his own brain.

Whatever the case, it appeared that Phoebe wanted to help people develop their spells. To what end, he still had no idea. Maybe he would ask her one day. Assuming she didn't kill him first, of course…

Shifting his attention back to his own arsenal, he couldn't help but notice how bloated the list had gotten over the years. He already had fifteen entries! Three of them at Masterful too!

Granted, other than his scythes or the Dance, he hadn't upgraded anything else during his time in the Valley, but that didn't mean he hadn't practiced them. Percy had used all his combat spells countless times against the beasts, honing both his fighting style and his magic to perfection. Specifically, both Grim Dance and Greater Foresight had grown a lot stronger, allowing him to peer a little farther into the future. At times, he was able to see a couple of alternative possibilities at once, allowing him to choose the best course of action. He was pretty sure that both Wild Arts were on the verge of an upgrade.

'For now, let's try to incorporate my new Refined spell into my fighting style.'

Lifting his eyes, he saw that the others were still looking at him expectantly. Chuckling, he placed his hands on their shoulders. Stirring his soul a little, he tried to move it as close to his skin as he could. His main body's soul felt more rigid than his clone's, but he got there after a few seconds. Next, he bridged the remaining gap with his mana.

The girls gasped upon feeling the connection to him, but Percy ignored their surprise, sending a few carefully curated images of his fight against the Green mantis. He focused on his and Sol's insights surrounding the boosting art. They weren't directly applicable to his companions in their current state, but maybe they could draw some inspiration from that to pave their own path.

Next, he left Elaine to ponder over the information on her own, before chatting with Nesha privately. He told her about Zoris, though he merely described him as “a passenger on his soul” that was “related to that ring”. He asked her to help him verify the old man wasn’t lying. Of course, he left some of the more sensitive information out, which made interrogating him a little trickier.

He had the god answer a few generic questions to his girlfriend, such as “did you tell Percy the truth?” or “did you leave anything important out?” or “are you plotting against him in any way?” Only after she was done vetting him did Percy allow himself to relax.

‘Happy now?! I’m not even sure what you were expecting. Why would I lie about my past with Svarog? Or about how I got to the lake?’

Percy shrugged.

‘You could have lied about what your blessing does.’

Zoris didn’t have any eyes, but Percy was pretty sure he would have rolled them if he did, practically feeling the former god’s annoyance ooze through their bond. But he didn’t linger on that.

Taking out his right gauntlet, he modified the fingerguards slightly. He left some extra space for the ring to sit comfortably within, while also making the construct box the object in more tightly, so that it wouldn’t slip away during a moment of inattention. From here on out, Percy fully intended to sleep with the darn thing on, until the blessing seeped into his core.

‘Is there anything I can do to speed the process up?’

‘Feed your mana into the ring and back to your core. It should happen on its own over time, since our bodies always passively circulate tiny amounts of mana. But you can get there faster if you focus on it… Actually, I’ve never seen a spell like that boosting art of yours… I wouldn’t be surprised if it cuts the time further.’

Nodding, Percy left the makeshift camp once more – just a bunch of jagged boulders, really – looking for something to practice his spells on.

It was time to start consolidating that bloated list of his…

Chapter 346: Harvest (1)

“Are you sure you want to fight them alone?” Elaine asked.

Her forehead creased with worry as the very earth beneath their feet shook. The smallest pebbles bounced up and down with each violent quake. Everyone in the group was strong enough to handle a couple of Green beasts with ease by now, but this wasn’t what Percy was planning to do. Instead, he was about to take a risk that they generally tended to avoid.

The trio was currently standing about a mile away from the western boundary of the Valley, staring at the wall of foam blocking the way to the outside world. They’d already confirmed with Micky that the Holy Child’s entourage was roaming close to the opposite side, so at least they wouldn’t have to worry about getting ambushed by a bunch of Blues.

Still, this was quite dangerous.

Counting the days, they knew the Divine Root was supposed to dump the next batch of beasts into the Decree today. Judging from the tremours, they already had. Whenever that happened, the eastern and western boundaries broke into absolute carnage. Dozens – if not hundreds – of Green creatures and thousands of Yellows were released in close proximity to one another. The handlers from House Ypnos then retracted their bloodline from the beasts, allowing the monsters to wake up and scatter through the Valley.

It wasn’t a peaceful transition in the slightest though.

The creatures were all highly territorial to begin with. The Greens, in particular, had all been local overlords before getting snatched from their homes. Most of them had never even encountered peers at the same grade before. At least, not in a long time. Suddenly finding themselves surrounded by both enemies and food, it wasn’t difficult to imagine the outcome.

By the time the survivors spread to the rest of the region, more than half would perish. Over the next several days, the remaining beasts would succumb to hunger, other beasts, or the humans – if there were any around. After that, things would calm down a little until the next shipment arrived.

So far, Percy's group had tried to steer clear of these hotspots during such times. Even the secondary surge of beasts that reached the north and south ends of the Valley was intense enough, so there hadn't been much of a reason for them to throw themselves into the carnage before.

That said, Percy wanted to train here today, to take advantage of both the beasts' numbers and the chaos. He hoped the overwhelming pressure would help him iron out the last few kinks in his fighting style and fully break into his new capabilities. Steady and controlled fights were fine for general training, but one needed to truly push themselves to their very limits every now and then.

At least, this was his experience, as he had personally achieved many of his greatest spell upgrades in the heat of battle. And he'd tried the safer route over the past few days, but it seemed to lack that little extra that could only be found when he truly put his life on the line. He was confident this was the very step he was missing for many of his spells to climb to the next level.

"Here they come. Just… be ready to save my ass if I screw up!" he said, only half-joking. This earned him some disapproving frowns from his companions, causing him to chuckle.

In the distance, the stampeding creatures were already approaching. A cloud of dust rose up, concealing the globules in the area. The beasts weren't advancing in an orderly manner. Not even close. Many were grouped together into herds and packs of various sizes, others running by themselves. A few focused mainly on escaping, while many attempted to chase them down. The more aggressive ones didn't even bother running. Instead, they held their ground, fighting each other.

But the fastest ones were already a couple hundred metres from Percy.

Tying the final piece of his armour into place, he activated his boosting art. The Dance with his first core, and Circulation with his second. He wasn't confident in using the upgraded version with both at the same time just yet, so he focused on the stronger of the two. Not only would it help more, he hoped to take advantage while the memories were still fresh in his mind.

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Two sets of lines lit up on his skin, the silver ones a touch brighter. Dozens of wisps of the same colour swirled around him, filling his body with strength one after the other. Raging torrents of ambient mana

rushed towards him, as a faint silver mist shrouded his body, mixing with the Regalia's teal shroud. He'd already filled his armour with tiny vents years ago, to better accommodate his boosting arts.

Taking out his scythe, he snapped it in half, pumping the self-repair runes full of fused mana. By the time the beasts were a hundred metres away, he held a complete weapon in each hand. But that was just the start.

He snapped them again, into three segments each, repeating his actions. His channels filled and emptied in equal measure as he fused his affinities as fast as he could currently manage, slowly but steadily forging his arsenal.

The dust now blocked the sky, the tidal wave of monsters pulverizing everything in their path. Any bones left from the previous batch got crushed into powder, as roars and agonized bellows filled the air.

Percy's heart raced in anticipation – and sure, maybe even a tiny hint of fear – as he looked at the creatures closest to him.

'Maybe I'm an idiot, and I'm about to get myself killed…'

No. Zoris – who had remained oddly silent today, expressing neither approval nor disapproval – had said it clearly. One couldn't become a god without the courage and stubbornness to pursue the impossible. Well, if that was true, then Percy was on course to become the strongest deity of them all.

Either way, his opponents were already upon him.

It was a herd of buffalos, though they were covered in shells made of the same material as their horns, Yellow cores burning brightly in their frames. Their shadows jumped forth, charging several metres in front of their actual bodies. His own projection shot forward to meet them, the weapons he had yet to finish crafting slicing into their souls.

'Not that way.'

His projection had dodged to his left, avoiding the first creature only to get skewered by the one behind it. Listening to his spell's unspoken advice, Percy dashed to his right instead, thinking it led to a more promising future.

The real buffalo arrived, Percy already circling around it. The beast steered to impale him, but he was far more agile. He wielded a whopping six scythes by now, their shafts rolling and pivoting along his joints, the constructs phasing freely through one another as they carved elegant arcs around his body.

Coming to a halt behind the beast, his gaze briefly lingered on it. Its limp frame collapsed just after its soul did. Not that surprising, since he'd already struck the buffalo thrice with each edge. Having suffered a total of eighteen wounds, each deeper than the next, there was no mystery left as to its fate. With a deafening boom, it hit the ground, skidding and rolling along the dirt.

But Percy wasn't paying it any attention, his eyes having already moved to the next pair of beasts.

'I guess that was overkill…'

His recent memories of Melodia might have subtly biased him to expect tougher opponents.

Deciding to better conserve his stamina, he settled for fewer hits this time. Sending both creatures to their doom, he hurled four of his Harvesters up, letting them fly for a couple of seconds. At the same time, he split the remaining pair in his hands in half, already regenerating them into more weapons as he slaughtered another beast with their edges.

Soon, the wave of buffalos had all moved past him, most of them still alive, save for half a dozen beasts unlucky enough to have met his spells head on.

Next, a pride of lions came at him. They were chasing the bovines – or had been, at least. They seemed happy enough to shift their sights to the human, practically drooling in the process. They looked no different from their mundane counterparts, except for their claws that were twice as long as they were supposed to be, their savage glint betraying their sharpness.

Smarter and nimbler than the previous beasts, they surrounded Percy, leaping at him from every direction.

His feet landed in all sorts of strange angles as he pivoted around the creatures – three at a time – his four weapons severing heads and limbs with every calculated slash.

More kept coming, of course, but Percy was only getting started.

The flying constructs fell back down, sinking into just as many felines, pinning them to the ground. Next, they unlodged themselves, spinning toward Percy. Letting go of the ones he was wielding, he freely exchanged them with the others whenever it was convenient, now juggling eight weapons in total.

The whole pride fell atop him, determined to taste his flesh today. But it wasn't enough. Over twenty lions, both male and female, met a swift end. Even if it had been twice as many, Percy wasn't afraid of any Yellows.

Not anymore.

The third wave approached. He didn't even bother to look at the creatures.

They didn't dare to attack him either, having watched the fate of their predecessors.

The two sides just ignored one another, as his eyes peered past the remaining Yellow beasts. He looked beyond the fourth and fifth waves too, his gaze sinking deep into the cloud of dust ahead.

The Greens were here.

Chapter 347: Harvest (2)

More tremors coursed through the Valley. Deafening ones this time, the first orbs of Green shining through the suffocating darkness.

The Divine Root always gave the weaker beasts a head start, before waking the stronger ones up. They had to, lest they all got killed before they even made it into the Valley proper. Should that happen, the Greens would starve that much sooner.

Colossal shadows the size of elephants barrelled toward Percy, their slightest move sending the dust in turmoil.

He hurled six scythes above once more, forging another six in his hands.

A giant tiger soon emerged, being the monster closest to him. Percy's head didn't even reach its chest. Two pristine white wings were folded neatly on its back. Though it didn't seem like they would be necessary against a land-dweller like him.

Its limbs bent as its muscles coiled with terrifying strength. It let out a low growl, before pouncing at Percy, the ground cracking where it had stood just a moment ago.

Having already seen the attack coming, Percy rolled on the dirt, watching the beast's razor-sharp claws pass mere inches from his face. But he didn't remain passive. Hurling two of his scythes at the creature's torso, he called the six above it to slice at its back. The remaining four, he kept for now, turning them incorporeal so that they wouldn't impede him as they phased through the ground.

Jumping to his feet, he was ready to meet the next challenger, the tiger's lifeless body crashing gracelessly behind him.

A titanic bear stood before him on its hindlegs this time. It was tall enough to tower over a medium-sized house, covered in dense black fur. Its paw descended with the force of a meteor, trying to squash him into paste – flesh, bones and armour alike.

Shooting between its legs like an arrow set loose, he ignored the booming shockwave behind him, delivering four deep cuts into its soul. The injuries caused its joints to buckle, as eight more weapons followed behind him. They spun right through the monster's neck, brutally shredding the silver flame in their passing.

Another giant fell, as Percy charged ahead, still not happy with his opponents, nor himself.

'There. Right in the midst of it. That's where I have to be!'

Running into the epicentre of the bloodbath, he dove into the very spot where the most Greens fought. Once more, he duplicated the scythes in his hands along the way, bringing the total to sixteen.

Jaws large enough to gobble him up in a single bite snapped at him, as hooved legs the size of charging rams tried to flatten him. Percy danced through it all, a storm of phantom crescents complementing his every move, unleashing hell upon his opponents.

Projections and reality blended, as did the dust in the air and the toxic globules drifting aimlessly around him. Crimson mud splotched beneath his boots, blooming waves rising with every fallen colossus. Every time a beast died, the survivors climbed over its lifeless body, trying not to drown amidst the ocean of death.

Finally, Percy hit his limit.

There were too many enemies. And they were too strong. Too large. And way too vicious.

Like a lone mouse surrounded by feral cats, his eyes darted all over the battlefield, always focusing on the most pressing threats. His lungs burned, as did his cores. And his channels. It wasn't just due to the rush of mana in and out of his body. The dust made each breath a monumental task, shredding through his larynx, causing his eyes to tear up.

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But he didn't dare to blink, nor did he consider pausing for even the briefest of instants, knowing such folly would be his doom.

Every now and then, an oversized claw ground against his armour, sparks flying as the reinforced mana cracked. The runes thrummed as they drank his mana, trying to weather the blows and repair his sole defence.

Sometimes, he got hit in the wrong spot, permanently peeling a piece off the Regalia, or sending him tumbling through the mess. Whenever that happened, he struggled to regain his footing before the next blow landed.

Keeping up with his spells wasn't easy either. He lost control of his scythes more times than he could count, both the ones flying around him and the ones held in his hands, or those rolling along his limbs. He knew he'd stretched himself thin, forging so many constructs at once.

But he pushed himself further and further, as his steps were both the fastest on the entire battlefield, and not nearly fast enough. He crafted more constructs too, whenever he got half a moment of respite.

He brought the total to twenty.

Then to twenty-five.

Thirty.

By now, it was impossible to wield them all.

Not consciously, at least.

So, he let go of many, allowing his instincts to do the rest. His mana to come to life.

Over half the Greens around him were dead, but that didn't relieve the pressure in the slightest. If anything, it had increased. The victors of the neighbouring battlefields rushed at him. Whether it was him they were attracted to, or the massacre, he didn't know. Even some of the braver Yellows joined in – whatever few were still around, anyway – perhaps hoping to snatch a bite from under the Greens' snouts.

Percy didn't care.

Ten? Twenty? Fifty?

'Bring them all on!'

His scythes flew on their own, forming inviolable cyclones as they ravaged the battlefield. Wherever they passed, souls were extinguished… eyes glazed over, never to see again.

Percy danced between the carcasses. And then, he danced on top of them.

Unlike the Yellow beasts, the Greens never ran away from him. Their pride wouldn't allow it. So many monstrous creatures in one place, to be defeated not by one another, but by a single human? At Yellow?! A tiny existence small enough to fit in their harrowing maws?!

Never!

Or well… at least that was what he guessed they thought, based on their actions. Sadly, he'd never get the chance to ask them.

They kept coming.

And they continued dying.

At some point, they even stopped fighting each other entirely. The survivors banded together, trying to slaughter the vile creature who dared to insult them. Or maybe they still slaughtered one another, and Percy was simply too preoccupied with his own battles to notice.

Either way, he danced and kept dancing, his Regalia reduced to little more than a single layer by now. His armoured feet stepped on fur… and skin… and scales… and feathers… and bones.

Eventually, it was over. No more challengers came.

Percy breathed heavily, the battle having taken everything he had and then some. His body hurt inside out, as did his soul. Turning his scythes corporeal, he allowed their countless blades to truly slice through the dust for the first time, blowing the cloud away to reveal the devastation that lay beneath.

He was currently located dozens of metres above the ground, standing atop a veritable mountain of slain beasts. The mangled bodies at its base bled in several spots, as they had been injured predominantly by one another. Those at the top did not, as most of them had fallen to his own ethereal scythes, having suffered no wounds but the ones on their souls.

A lake of blood stretched in every direction, seeping slowly into the torn earth, forming a whirlpool or even a waterfall in the occasional fissure. Scanning the countless bodies, Percy couldn't spot a single intact soul. The few that remained were already about to fizzle out, as were their crumbling cores.

Well, except for his companions'.

Nesha and Elaine stood some distance away – the only living beings in the area beside him – their faces pale and their eyes wide. Even his cousin hadn't dared to step closer to the carnage, despite being stronger than him overall. Until she got her domain, her spatial awareness and her survivability fell a little short of his own.

Though he didn't miss the dense droplet of pressurized water floating silently in front of her index finger, or the tiny butterflies fluttering by Nesha's side, ready to be unleashed at a moment's notice. Knowing they could have intervened at any time filled him with warmth, but luckily, it hadn't been necessary.

Looking up, he couldn't help but grin.

Dozens of scythes spun in unison. He could feel each and every one of them. But he wasn't manually controlling them. Merely directing them. Guiding them. Working with them. They responded to his slightest thought, his every impulse. But they were also free, like silent guardians animated by their own nascent will.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Replicating Soul Harvester – Refined + Vengeful Weapons – Refined -> Infinite Harvest of Souls – Masterful!]

Chapter 348: Fighting style

Percy was more than happy with his new spell upgrade, but this was merely the appetizer.

Before entering the Thirsty Valley, he had resolved himself to upgrade his boosting art by the time he was out. And sure enough, he had tried his hardest to accomplish precisely that, spending every waking second working on some aspect of the spell. Only, the way he viewed the Dance was different from how someone like Rhaziel or Metatron did.

For them, its only value was in supercharging one's core and channels, allowing them to wield more mana. And sure, this was admittedly a huge part of it. But it wasn't even close to the full extent of what Micky had shown him in that blood-stained coliseum all those years ago. The true Dance of the Savage Gods was a fighting style – first and foremost. The circulating mana, the elegant footwork, the skilful use of his weapons… everything was merely a tiny part of a greater whole, meant to come together into the full technique.

Granted, Percy had already surpassed his friend in pretty much every single area.

He had already mastered the final version of the Dance that Micky himself had never learned, and he'd even done so for both of his affinities. His Quarterstaff had originally been inspired by his friend's staves, though he had since upgraded it several times, through Reinforcement, affinity fusion, runecrafting and even the things Sol had recently taught him on Melodia. As for his movements, he had also adapted them extensively to his situation, first by incorporating the sharpness of Takeo's style into his own, and later by using his mutated eyes to both hone his skill and decipher his opponents' intentions.

Percy had always meant to not only push all these spells to their absolute limit, but to eventually fuse them together.

This was why he hadn't stopped pitting himself against the onslaught of beasts, using the overwhelming rush of monstrosities to hammer his magic into perfection, one battle at a time. Following that first bloodbath, he continued fighting against the surge of creatures whenever the Root dumped a fresh batch into the Valley, risking his life every single time.

Sure, he grew noticeably stronger after each fight, but that didn't mean it was no longer dangerous. His offensive power kept climbing, but a single moment of inattention could easily prove his last.

By the third battle, Percy was comfortable enough with the soul component of the Dance to keep the pure version active at the same time. The cyan ribbons now extended out of his body, fluttering next to the silver wisps, pushing his strength and speed even higher as he danced through the battlefield. The increase of pure mana allowed him to fuse more of the teal substance, letting him forge his scythes faster, and to better fuel the enchantments on his armour.

Nesha and Elaine hadn't slacked off either. Though they preferred to practice their spells against the lone stragglers that survived Percy's massacres, not daring to copy him in his madness.

Two months in, he began circulating fused mana again, turning both the flaming orbs and the whirlpools teal, along with many of the glowing lines on his body. That said, he still had trouble preventing his cores from stripping the mana from the second element, so it was debatable whether his spell was any stronger.

Regardless, he knew this was a necessary step into achieving his vision, so he pressed on.

A few weeks after that, Elaine finally made it to Blue!

This was the single most important milestone before their fight against Acton's group, as she shouldn't have much trouble holding her own against multiple people at the same grade – after practicing a little with her domain, of course.

Even better, it turned out that there was a second Orange-born among the Holy Child's guards!

This meant that he would be stuck at Green too for the foreseeable future, leaving only four Blues for Percy's group to fight. It was still going to be tough, but more than manageable. Especially after all of Percy's recent upgrades following his clone's return.

Or, at least, that should have been the case…

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Sadly, their side wasn't the only one to have received an unexpected injection of power from outside the Valley. A second Holy Child had entered Kronos's Decree at some point!

The globules were still both numerous and small, indicating that the slow season had yet to end. It appeared to be little more than an unfortunate coincidence. Perhaps, the Green-born had grown impatient like Acton, hoping to get a head-start over his rivals.

At least, the new Holy Child was still in his late teens – not much older than his colleague had been upon entering the Decree. This meant he was decades from Violet. All five of his guards were at Green too, so Percy didn't expect any of them to advance in the next few months.

For better or for worse, the newcomer – Femel, according to Micky – had decided to stick with Acton's group. Probably to socialize, as spending years training here could get quite tedious.

Whatever his reason was, Percy's feelings on the matter were mixed. On one hand, it was good that Micky could keep track of both the Green-borns. Had they split up, Percy's group would have easily stumbled upon Femel's at some point. Then again, that might have been for the best, as it would have allowed them to take them down separately. Now, they had no choice but to face both groups at once.

They considered waiting a bit longer, since Acton was still some time away from Violet. Plus, all his guards who would advance already had. Then again, there was no guarantee Femel would leave soon, and it was only a matter of time before his own guards started advancing too. Not to mention that more Holy Children would start appearing the closer they got to the faster season.

So, the battle was pretty much inevitable at this point. Just like that, they now had to fight against five Blues, and seven Greens!

This was already the kind of force that could besiege a Violet!

Gritting his teeth, Percy was left with no choice but to dive back into his training, hoping to get as strong as possible before his next advancement. And sure enough, his Status registered yet another massive upgrade about a month later.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Wild Art: Greater Foresight – Refined + Wild Art: Grim Dance – Refined -> Wild Art: Grim Battlefield – Masterful!]

The new spell allowed him to better understand how his opponents' moves would be affected by his own and vice versa. Essentially, it blended the two sets of projections seamlessly, into a more cohesive picture of the future. He could peer a little farther and with greater accuracy, or he could forgo that to see a couple of alternative possibilities at once.

It might not sound like much, but it raised his strength even more than the Infinite Harvest. This was one of the spells that formed a positive feedback loop with his mutation, so merely the fact that he had registered it had enhanced it even more.

‘Almost there…’

Looking at his Status again, he focused on his list of spells. It had shrunk a little since the last time he checked, but the quality of the entries had risen sharply.

___

Spells:

___

Registering two Masterful spells in quick succession was certainly impressive, but this was the culmination of over a decade’s worth of efforts. He had no idea what the final upgrade would look like – a fusion of three Masterful spells and one Refined was certainly going to be extremely powerful, though he didn’t think it would change classification.

He'd never heard of a tier above it, and he very much doubted there even was one. At least, not for mortals. Considering that the Refined tier was already quite extensive – his armour having upgraded several times before going past it – he was sure the final upgrade of his boosting art would land somewhere in the upper range of Masterful spells.

Other than the new entries, Percy had made some progress with his fused mana too. The teal lines now reached closer to his cores, and he was able to preserve more of it through the conversion. By now, the extra mana he packed inside his body was starting to make up for the loss in efficiency.

Another change was that he had finally outgrown the bloodbaths he was using to train. But that was okay, as he now had a better option. A safer one too.

Sparring against Elaine every single day, he helped her get used to her domain, while simultaneously learning to fight inside one. His promotion helped him do much better against her than he had against Galahad, though he knew he owed part of his success to her inexperience.

Still, after a few more months of this, and once his second core caught up, he was confident he would be able to fight one of the Blues, lifting some pressure off his cousin.

'And I already know which one I'll pick…'

Weeks passed, until the fateful day arrived. Or, well… the first of a series of fateful days.

His second core reached Yellow.

Chapter 349: Third cord

After filling his second core up, Percy revelled in his new strength for a few minutes.

Activating his boosting art, he exhaled in relief upon sensing the restored balance between his affinities. The first thing he did was try to combine Synchronization with the Dance. Like before, each instance of the boosting art strengthened his body and soul, allowing him to push its counterpart just a little farther, until the spells reached a higher ceiling.

Only, this time, it was the Dance he was using – not just Circulation – so the effect was even more pronounced. His muscles swelled and his veins bulged, his skin reddening like a ripe tomato, before tearing in many spots as blood seeped through. Over the years, he had grown a lot more accustomed to Synchronization, but he had fallen a bit out of touch recently, and the twin Dance ravaged his body more violently than ever before.

Even when he'd used the trollsfury potion in the past, it hadn't been this bad. If it wasn't for the passive boosts to his physique due to his promotions, he was sure his flesh would have already exploded in a rain of blood and gore.

The silver and cyan lines pulsed alongside his cores, an audible humming sound reaching his ears as his very bones creaked with each violent thrum. The external flows intensified this time, the silver wisps growing larger and faster, the cyan ribbons longer and more erratic. A teal mist formed on its own

around him, spinning like a faint hurricane as it dragged colossal amounts of ambient mana from his surroundings.

He tried to move.

Even the slightest shift sent a painful jolt through both his body and soul, causing him to wince in agony.

‘We can’t have this. I won’t be able to fight… I need to get used to it by the end of the week.’

Waiting this long was a risk they’d been forced to take out of sheer necessity, as Elaine wasn’t confident she could fight five Blues by herself. Even four of them were potentially too many, but there was nothing more they could do. They certainly couldn’t afford to delay any longer, lest they gave the new set of guards the chance to start advancing.

Sighing, Percy willed his mana to fuse, causing the teal mist around him to expand. Stuffing it into the ribbons and the wisps, he changed their colours, as the teal lines spread from his extremities to his cores. Fusing his mana was easier than ever before. Not only did his higher grade improve his control, his affinities were finally balanced again.

The teal colour stopped mere inches from his cores, before abruptly shifting into the corresponding mana types. This unwanted conversion clearly wasn’t without its losses, though that might be a good thing at the moment, as his cores inadvertently relieved some of the pressure in his channels by robbing the fused mana of some of its properties.

‘Okay, this is workable for now.’

It wasn’t perfect. Ideally, he didn’t want his cores to as much as touch his fused mana. His ultimate goal was to fully saturate both cores and the two sets of channels with teal mana – down to the last drop. Eventually, he’d have to rid the spell of this flaw. But this was acceptable as far as his fight with Acton was concerned. He was probably at around 95% of his full strength right now, which should be good enough. Closing the remaining gap was likely just a matter of repetition.

Over the next few days, he resumed sparring with Elaine, causing her to exert herself a little more than before. At the same time, Nesha roamed the area – at least the places Micky said were safe, planting

more of her traps wherever she could. They didn't know where the eventual battle would be fought – it would depend on the Holy Children's movements – so they wanted to prepare multiple possible battlefields around the Valley.

Other than his spell upgrades, Percy worked on a few other things.

He verified his latest promotion allowed him to create another clone, bringing the total number of ethereal cords to three. This wasn't his first attempt this year either, since he'd tried it once before, back when his first core reached Yellow.

And it had worked. Sort of. Much like it had been during his first couple of years in the Guild, creating a second clone had given him regular headaches and fits of disorientation. He had kept losing control of his body, his mind drifting into Micky's as he struggled to retain his sense of self.

Luckily, this was no longer a problem now that his second core had caught up.

Suffice to say, Percy had already collected enough data to determine with certainty how his bloodline scaled with his grade. Essentially, each promotion seemed to boost his capacity by about half a clone. It wasn't much, but both of his cores appeared to contribute, at least.

With a single Red core, he hadn't been able to use his ability at all.

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At Orange, he had managed to send out his first clone.

With a second Red core, he had managed to have two cords at once, but not without issues.

With two Orange cores, the second cord had stabilized.

And now this.

He couldn’t help but envy his relatives a little. Their version scaled exponentially, while his own did so linearly. And the rate was quite punishing in his case too. They got to triple their capacity with each promotion, while he only got a measly half a cord… ɾàNóβÈȘ

Then again, he knew he shouldn’t be complaining. The others only produced mindless flesh dummies, while he got to create semi-independent versions of himself, snatching Decrees and mutations, and Rings of Sacrilege from everywhere.

On that topic, Percy hadn’t stopped trying to internalize the blessing either. He didn’t do it while he fought, as the augmented mana wouldn’t help him. It would only waste his reserves for no reason, putting him at a disadvantage.

But he kept at it whenever he was idle.

Running his boosting art all day long, he tried to not only familiarize himself with the spells, but to accelerate the blessing’s integration, much like Zoris had advised him to do.

In fact, after watching him experiment with the ethereal cords, the former god had shared some more information with him. He had told him this was very likely an area where the blessing would help. While he couldn’t be certain until they tested it, he was confident the concept of permanence would increase Percy’s capacity further!

By how much, Zoris had no idea, but the revelation had caused Percy’s heart to skip a beat. Even a single extra cord would be massive, though he was secretly hoping for a little more than that. From that point on, he looked at the ring with even more greed, eager to experience the countless benefits it would bring him.

And he did feel a little different, as the constant flow of grey mana through his core seemed to have left something behind. It was faint, and it wasn’t nearly done yet, but he had already noticed some mild aftereffects even when he wasn’t directly using the ring. Zoris told him this was only to be expected, as the concept had already begun to rub off on his core. The effect would be subtle for now. And temporary, until the process was complete.

In any case, this would only matter if they managed to survive the upcoming battle, so Percy didn't want to get too excited about it.

Instead, he thought about how he could leverage his new cord to possibly give his side an advantage. He hadn't sent out any new clones since Melodia, because there wasn't much of a point. Even if they found something interesting, they didn't have time to stay away for long. They'd have to be back within days – from their perspective – as Percy needed one free clone to make sure Micky flew away from Acton at the start of the battle.

As for the new cord…

Well, one option was to possess one of the Green beasts in the Valley, giving his team an extra combatant. It wasn't that great of an idea though. Even if he could convince one of the creatures to throw its life away for the second time, its impact on the battle would be minimal. At most, it would keep one of the Green guards busy for a few minutes.

A better choice – and the one they would most likely go with – was to possess one of the girls again. The clone wouldn't be able to do much with his limited stash, nor would his main body have any mana to spare on him. But he should at least be able to fit one of his companions with a set of armour, raising their survivability a little.

Elaine was the most important person in the group. If anyone else died, the survivors might still make it through. If Elaine died, they were all done for. That said, he had decided to give the second set of armour to his girlfriend instead, since he figured it would be more impactful in a fight between Greens than one between Blues.

With everything figured out, Percy spent the last couple of days reforging his constructs – both his own and Nesha's. He'd grown a little rusty over the years, as runecrafting was an area he hadn't focused much on during his stay in the Valley – other than replacing a piece of his armour here and there.

Luckily, his improved control over his mana coupled with his sharper senses and clearer mind allowed him to get back into it fairly quickly. His reinforced mana was even stronger than before. The teal powder didn't change between grades – it was the same whether it was crystallized by a Red or a Violet, the only thing changing being the quantity they condensed. But the soft mana did, elevating the mixture to the next level.

He forged two sets of armour, one adjusted to Nesha's proportions and circumstances. She obviously didn't need the vents, as she couldn't use the Shroud, nor the Dance, thus Percy had focused on maximizing its structural integrity, since his clone wouldn't be able to spare as much mana for the enchantments.

Percy prepared a few dozen scythes too. While he could replicate them during the battle, he didn't want to risk his only weapon getting broken before he managed to copy it, thus having to fight a Blue unarmed. He had Nesha hide a few of the Harvesters underground while she spread her traps around the Valley. Hopefully, Percy wouldn't need to rely on these, but it didn't hurt to have some spares available.

On the eve of the battle, he asked Elaine to renew the tattoos on his body one last time. In the end, they had never needed to use them during their stay in the Valley, and they wouldn't do much for Nesha or Elaine at this point, as their recent advancements had already rendered them obsolete.

Percy could still possibly benefit – just about – though the effect was bound to be greatly muted. Still, it should give him a helpful nudge if the fight was close. Consuming several doses of the brown trollsfury ink, he had Elaine draw a massive tattoo shaped like the troll king's face on his back. With this much, it was bound to do something. She also drew a long, winding vine along his right arm, each of its green leaves representing a dose of healing ink. Having consumed a dozen vials for that too, it should also be rather handy.

With that, he had two more trump cards to pull in a pinch.

As Elaine worked on his tattoos, Percy prepared two clones, sending one to his familiar and the other to Nesha, before handing her the armour. The last thing they did was to take turns resting, ensuring that everyone was in perfect condition before engaging their enemies.

And on the next day, they coordinated with the crow to approach their targets when they were the most tired.

It was finally here.

The moment they had spent over a decade working towards…

Chapter 350: Opening shot

Nesha took a deep breath after the other, activating Circulation. Soon, a series of black circles of various sizes formed on her skin, many crossing freely over one another while others appeared perfectly isolated. At the same time, a jagged set of brown lines branched out of her abdomen, glowing all over her body like a bunch of cracks.

It sucked she couldn't tap into Synchronization like this, but she'd still take a Green core over a slightly stronger boosting art any day of the week. Glancing at her companions, she noticed they were done with their preparations too.

'Are you ready?' Percy's clone asked.

It was weird to hear his voice ringing through her soul again, after so many years. She didn't miss the worry in his tone either. In some ways, she had the easiest job, since she was the only one who wouldn't have to fight against a Blue – hopefully. Then again, everyone understood this was her first real battle – the first time she had to fight a human mage without help. If that wasn't enough, she might have to face the most opponents – a whopping seven of them at once in the worst-case scenario!

This was over twice as many Greens as Elaine had fought outside Goldenfield town!

Granted, Nesha was a lot stronger right now than Elaine had been before the start of their training. Not only due to her second core, but also due to the nature of her primary affinity and the countless traps she had prepared. She wasn't the inexperienced girl she'd once been, having pitted herself against hundreds of powerful monsters over the years.

All of them had.

Still, there was a huge gap between a beast and a person. If not in raw power, then certainly in intelligence. Keeping so many enemies from interfering with the others was bound to be tricky. Well, if she got lucky, Elaine might take one or two out before the start of the battle, but this wasn't something she could count on.

She sighed.

'About as ready as I'll ever be.'

Following Micky's instructions, Percy led the group towards their opponents. All these years, they had kept their distance, hiding like rats from the Holy Child's entourage. They still weren't sure whether their enemies had somehow missed all the clues that they weren't alone inside the Decree, or if they simply didn't care. Whether it was ignorance or arrogance, they were going to pay a steep price for it today.

At some point, the trio stopped. According to their estimates, they were already a couple hundred metres away from the enemy camp. This was about as close as they could get without alerting the Blues.

Elaine looked at Percy, and then at her, getting two nods back. Turning her gaze towards her opponents, she remained motionless for a few seconds, probably trying to discern their exact positions through the dense cloud of drifting globules.

Then, she raised her hand, pointing toward one of the sleeping men with her index finger, gathering a colossal amount of water mana. Compressing it into a single point, Elaine held it in place as a bright azure glow illuminated her surroundings.

Nesha and Percy held their breaths, watching without blinking as the only Blue in their team prepared her opening strike. Elaine had already poured more mana into the attack than she'd ever used while sparring with them, and she wasn't even done yet.

Some images suddenly flashed through Nesha's mind, as Percy's clone relayed the information Micky had just sent to his main body. It was the layout of the enemy camp. Without Elaine's higher grade or Percy's mutation, Nesha was having the most trouble examining them by herself.

Eight of their twelve opponents were currently asleep. This was probably about the best they could have hoped for. Two of the Greens were keeping watch, as a third sat in a meditative position, an empty vial next to him. A Blue was also up, currently working on a spell of his.

Elaine was currently aiming at one of the sleeping Blues. If they could cut their numbers down before the start of the battle, it would make everything a hundred times easier. Ideally, they would have loved to eliminate Acton first. Not only was he among the strongest in the group, he was also the one who held Micky hostage.

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With him out of the picture, the crow would be able to join them, helping Nesha take out the Greens, before the two of them aided Percy and then Elaine. ŔάNΘBÊŠ

Sadly, the Holy Child had been at Blue the longest out of anyone here – for a couple of decades already. He wouldn't be easy to hit from this distance, even while asleep. That was why they had decided to target the guard who had advanced most recently. And Elaine had expertly positioned herself such that one of the Greens was standing between her and her mark, aiming to take both out if possible.

A deafening boom broke Nesha out of her thoughts as Elaine finally unleashed her spell.

The recoil sent her sliding a few metres back, her feet carving two deep grooves in the dry soil. A bright flash blinded the trio momentarily as the horrifying blast tore a path through the drifting globules, crossing the vast distance in an instant.

Not wasting a moment, Elaine was already running behind it, the others a couple steps after her. At the same time, Nesha took advantage of the clear path now connecting them to their opponents, trying to wrap her mind around the aftermath of the attack.

A corpse lay face-first in the mud, a crimson pool rapidly spreading from the massive hole in its chest. Right behind the dead mage, a Blue stood next to a wide crater, having barely woken up in time to evade the attack. Not entirely though. He held the bleeding stump of his right arm tightly, his face pale as he gritted his teeth in pain.

The impact had alerted the rest too, jolting everyone to their feet. By the time Elaine reached them, they had all turned to face her. That said, Percy's cousin didn't seem deterred in the slightest. She was by far the most powerful being in the entire Valley, and she clearly knew it.

She must've unleashed her domain, judging from the enemy Greens shuddering under the invisible pressure. And that was merely the beginning. Drawing a frightening amount of mana from both her cores, Elaine manifested several enormous tentacles, each of them descending on her opponents with enough force to pulverize a house.

Four of the surviving Greens jumped out of the way clumsily, though it looked like the last two were about to get crushed!

Unfortunately, the Blues intervened at the last second to protect them. A pair of giant hands made of mud rose before Acton and one of the Greens, blocking the whips aimed at them. At the same time, two curtains of steam shielded another Blue – the second Holy Child – and one of his subordinates. The other three Blues also defended themselves with all sorts of glowing barriers – a cyan bubble of pure mana, a spinning wheel made of dozens of rotating wind blades and a flash of lightning that pierced through the descending whip, evaporating it in mid-air.

Five powerful domains slammed onto Elaine's, pushing hers back with ease. Some of the pressure even found its way to Percy and Nesha, almost causing them to stumble.

That said, there was no way Nesha would let go of the chance to take another opponent out.

She turned towards the Green closest to her – a blonde woman who appeared disoriented, still clearly shaken by the suddenness of the ambush. Nesha compressed the space separating them, crossing half the distance in a single step as her body stretched into a weird shape.

Before the woman even realized what was going on, her torso exploded in shards of bone and bits of flesh, a flock of butterflies emerging victoriously from within.

Nesha wanted to keep going – to take another enemy out. But three spells were already descending upon her – one of them having even come from a Blue. Gritting her teeth, she took a step back through the still-compressed patch of space behind her, barely avoiding getting ground to dust by the attacks.

Elaine must've noticed, manifesting more whips and putting more strength behind her domain to stop four of the Blues from harassing her and Percy. The only one she didn't attack was a tall young man in elegant clothes. His unassuming features had twisted into a condescending smirk upon noticing their grades, his long, brown hair fluttering wildly behind him as will and mana clashed.

The man was naturally Acton – who had all grown up by now.

Yet, the smile froze on his lips the following instant, his head jerking up in surprise. Nesha saw nothing there, but she guessed the storm of invisible scythes Percy had brewed had already entered the sadistic bastard's domain.

Leaping back to avoid them, Acton was forced to put some distance from Elaine, as Percy chased after him, aggressively pushing him back.

On the other side of the battlefield, Nesha noticed a giant crow flying, four sets of glowing lines decorating his plumage with all sorts of intricate patterns as he took advantage of the chaos to slip away.

‘Good… he made it out in time…’ Percy’s clone said, a wave of relief rippling through both of their souls.

Nesha didn’t get to dwell on her companions for much longer though, as the five surviving Greens had already grouped up, flinging their spells at her. Having correctly estimated that she would take them out one by one if they let her, they had clearly decided to gang up on her before assisting their leaders.

Nesha took another step back to avoid the attacks, splitting her focus between preparing a new flock of butterflies, and keeping her escape route open.

Recalling the crow’s bloodied feathers as he shielded her from Grian’s attacks with his own body all those years ago, her lips curled upwards.

‘Time to pay you back for that.’