Wanderer 351

Chapter 351: Devastation

Nesha's situation was a little strange.

Her Chaotic Execution was one of the most lethal attacks in the entire Valley, allowing her to take out any of the Greens with ease if only she had a second or two close to them.

Unfortunately, aiming the horrific butterflies accurately was tough, which limited the spell to short and medium range. Her opponents had clearly noticed, banding together to protect themselves. Whenever she tried to approach one, they would all pelt her location with spells, forcing her to retreat. She could still attack from farther away, but she wasn't able to teleport the constructs directly into their bodies like that, which only gave them the chance to shoot them down.

At the same time, her Twisted Dance – the evolved form of her old Space Squeeze spell – gave her a ton of mobility. It was far more efficient than the Crude version had been, consuming less mana while allowing her to keep a larger patch of space compressed for longer. Her own movements inside it had also been honed to perfection through years of copying Percy's technique – hence the spell's name.

Like that, she was able to put a ton of pressure on the guards, yet without managing to take out any more of them. The Greens couldn't assist their superiors until she was gone, but they couldn't catch her either. Thus, the two sides had silently decided to put some distance from the Blues for now, unwilling to get caught in the apocalyptic storm of magic before their own battle reached a conclusion.

That didn't mean their fight was at a stalemate though.

One side still held a clear advantage, so it was only a matter of time until things changed.

Nesha could store and regenerate a lot of mana thanks to her second core and Circulation, but not enough to compete with five Greens in an extended battle. She was forced to conserve her strength, her attacks growing less frequent as she focused on defence. She kept herself at a safe distance as her opponents chased her through the Valley.

At the same time, both sides paid close attention to one another, analysing the opposition in search of an opening.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for Nesha and Percy's clone to discover a problem.

Initially, they had considered themselves lucky that Acton's guards weren't too powerful. They all possessed common affinities and no notable bloodlines. Of course, most of them had already advanced, so it was Elaine who benefited from that, currently having a slightly easier time dealing with three of them.

Of the remaining two, the first had died during the opening shot, leaving only one among Nesha's opponents. The other four Greens had come from Femel's team. And they were all a lot trickier to deal with.

Nesha and Percy weren't sure what had caused this discrepancy.

One possibility was that Femel was simply more talented than Acton, enjoying an elevated status in the Order. Another scenario was that Acton had been given a weaker squad as punishment for having lost a group of guards already. In fact, they thought this was more likely, as the first group Percy and Elaine had faced had definitely been stronger.

Either way, it made Nesha's life a lot harder, as she was the one who had to deal with them now.

One had the same illusion bloodline that had troubled Elaine in the past. It allowed him to hide his position and sneak attack from elsewhere. Nesha had found this out the hard way when the man split off from the group at some point, ambushing her from a different angle.

The only reason she had even survived the attack was Percy's armour. The clone kept it in its invisible and ethereal state for most of the battle so that it wouldn't impede her. It was so comfortable that she'd almost forgotten she was wearing it. Still, he was able to turn it into an impregnable defence at a moment's notice – blocking the Greens' spells with ease.

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After all, Percy's Regalia had been strong enough to weather attacks of that grade even before his recent promotion. Sadly, the clone didn't have enough mana to fuel the enchantments properly, so any damage it did take couldn't easily be reversed.

The person with the illusions wasn't the only problem.

One had a strange mana type Nesha had never seen before. His spells were fast and difficult to detect, applying an invisible force from multiple directions in an attempt to hold her in place. Percy said it was probably a gravity affinity, though he hadn't seen it used like that before.

Either way, it made her think twice before approaching.

Finally, the last two had an air affinity, but it looked different from Micky's, their mana sporting a lighter colour. The winds they manifested seemed to move faster too, indicating they had a blessing. Most annoyingly, they used it to propel themselves and their teammates forward, giving the whole group the speed to keep up with Nesha's own movements to an extent.

Unwilling to give up, she danced around the Valley, five Greens hot in pursuit. Every now and then, they tried to ignore her and return to the Blues, but Nesha always circled back to harass them when that happened, leaving them no choice but to stick to the chase.

Varying her attacks a little, she occasionally released some earth mana through her feet, sending a stone spear or two jutting up at them, trying to catch them by surprise. The flimsy spell was both weak and telegraphed, however, so it was mostly her space affinity they focused on.

"It's over." one of them said at some point, watching her breathe heavily.

Nesha had no clue how long they'd been at it – but her first core had almost run dry, her mana down to a fifth.

"Keeping five of us occupied for so long is commendable," another added. "You're clearly quite talented – as are your teammates. It's such a pity you had the gall to attack – not one, but two – Holy Children… Some crimes just can't be forgiven…"

Hearing the fake melancholy in the man's voice, Nesha couldn't help but smile coldly.

"On that, we agree. Unfortunately for you, that Holy Child you're guarding has committed a couple too many."

Seemingly realizing something, the man who had just spoken turned his attention down, his eyes widening as he noticed the patches of dirt shifting slowly beneath their feet.

He opened his mouth, about to warn the others, but it was too late. Nesha hadn't just run blindly all this time. She'd not only lured them at one of her previously prepared ambush spots, but she'd even taken the time to slowly push her traps around, gathering them all in a single place. Studying the way these people moved, she wanted to ensure she would take most of them down once she acted, as the same trick wouldn't work a second time.

As for those useless stone spears she'd fired?

It was just a misdirection – to divert their attention from what she'd actually been doing with her earth mana.

Over a hundred stone tablets shot up with no warning, surrounding the Greens from every direction. There were more than the ones she'd used in Bogside town, and she'd also improved a lot since then. She'd honed her runecrafting skills and advanced her grade, allowing her to pack more power into the traps.

At some point during her stay in the Valley, her Status had even recognized the constructs as a proper spell. On top of that, she'd taken a lot of time observing how the distortions stacked, fine-tuning the formation to maximize the destruction she unleashed, eventually upgrading the spell to Refined. Finally, she'd crafted the tablets out of her own earth mana this time, so that she could move them around more easily as needed.

Suffice to say, her enemies were already emptying their cores in a desperate attempt to shoot the constructs down. Sadly for them, their reserves weren't much fuller than hers. Giving up, one of the air users abandoned his companions, trying to escape by himself.

Nesha ignored him for now, focusing on eliminating the rest.

The first trap activated, and then the second… the fifth… the twentieth. Intricate runes lit up in a cascade of black and brown, before space itself began to twist. The brown colour of the ground, the light blue of the floating globules and the unique pink of human flesh all blended into a turbulent lake, spanning an area dozens of metres in every direction.

The chaotic bubble rolled and twisted as various spots expanded or contracted. Four splotches of red bloomed for the briefest of instants, before fading back into the tapestry of madness. The spell died out a few seconds later, the emerging mess splashing down over a wide circle, more liquid than solid.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Underground Currents – Crude + Spatial Collapse – Refined -> Spatial Devastation – Refined!]

Nesha sighed, not even bothering to read the notification. Gathering what little mana she'd managed to regenerate, she chased after the lone survivor.

She didn't know if Percy or Elaine needed help, but she couldn't afford to let even a single enemy escape, or he would alert the countless mages stationed outside the Decree.

Chapter 352: Clash of domains

Fighting against four Blues, Elaine was at an even greater numerical disadvantage than the last time she'd faced others of her grade. Granted, her second core helped a little, bridging the gap to an extent.

Her domain, on the other hand?

Not so much.

In terms of raw power, it was certainly stronger than those of her opponents. Sadly, domains were versatile tools that required a lot of skill to wield properly. If only she'd had a couple more years with hers, this might have not been as big of a problem. Yet, here she was, barely seven months after her advancement. Meanwhile, her enemies had all had theirs for several times longer.

'How am I even meant to hit them like this?!'

The four domains collided against hers, pushing it back from every direction, not allowing it to expand properly. It was suffocating, feeling their wills suppress hers. More importantly, it had a very tangible impact on the battle.

Inside her domain, her spells were fiercer – more potent. Her Kraken's Gambit had evolved into the Kraken's Lair a long time ago. Elaine could now manifest countless constructs at once and manipulate each of them freely. She could turn them long and thick like a monster's tentacles, putting a lot of crushing power behind each strike.

Or, she could create the same sharp whips she had used in the past, focusing on speed and precision over brute strength. Imbuing each construct with whatever properties she wanted, she could craft the perfect spell to breach through her opponents' defences at a moment's notice.

In theory, at least.

The reality was that her tentacles lost much of their power the moment they crossed into the other domains. Even worse, one of them – the Holy Child – possessed a steam affinity, partially sharing her element. Femel was clearly an expert in raising the temperature inside his domain, causing her water spells to evaporate rapidly.

Elaine had to spend a lot more mana to maintain them, which put a massive drain on her reserves. If that wasn't enough, the four Blues clearly knew how to fight together, allowing their domains to freely overlap instead of interfering with one another. That way, the Green-born was able to share the boiling effect with the two domains neighbouring his own.

If she wanted to conserve her mana, her only option was to attack the fourth person standing opposite Femel. Her enemies had clearly considered that too, however, delegating the spot to the air affinity user, who had the easiest time dodging her attacks to begin with. Left with no other choice, Elaine was forced to pause her offensive for the time being, focusing on defence. At least until she thought of a way out of this mess.

That wasn't going well either, however.

Harassed from four directions, she had to deal with violent arcs of lightning trying to zap her down, each powerful enough to reduce a large tree to charcoal in an instant. There was also an endless rain of tiny cyan projectiles pelting the whole place. They weren't that strong individually, but they were impossible to dodge, putting a lot of pressure on her.

The Green-born fought using an army of cloud-like wolves. They were made of steam, hot enough to scorch the earth beneath their paws with every step, leaving a series of blackened patches in their passing. Finally, there were several tall cyclones tearing through the battlefield. They wandered in seemingly random directions, lowering both her visibility and her mobility. Every now and then, one of them flew at her, trying to hit her when she least expected it.

Thankfully, her Jet Step spell allowed her to shoot streams of pressurized water from her soles, letting her manoeuvre freely in three dimensions. It helped a lot, but she couldn't possibly dodge everything coming at her. Beyond that, her domain weakened her opponents' spells too, to an extent. Her Bubble Coat soaked whatever made it through, the dense bubbles around her body popping by the dozens each time she got hit, more forming to replace them.

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'Their domains are a problem. My mana consumption is too… But that's not everything.'

Most curiously, the four mages seemed to coordinate perfectly, timing their attacks to the last millisecond to cut off her escape routes. And they achieved all of this without even speaking a word. This was arguably her biggest issue. If not for this, Elaine would have probably found an opening to take one of them down by now, turning the battle around.

The only question was… how did they do it?

Obviously, Blues had sharp senses and quick reflexes. They were all experienced mages, so it wasn't that strange that they could adapt to each other's moves in real time. But this clearly went a step beyond that. Often, they seemed to act simultaneously, as if they could read each other's minds.

'Are they somehow communicating through their domains?' she wondered.

She'd never heard of such a trick. Not that she knew everything there was to know about domains – she was still very much new at this – but she was disinclined to think this was the reason. After all, even the pairs that stood opposite to one another seemed to have no problem coordinating, despite their domains not touching. Maybe the others helped them relay their messages, but she doubted they would be reacting this quickly if they had to go through so many hoops.

'It's not due to their domains. None of their affinities should allow this either. And they don't look like they have any blessings…'

This only left two possibilities. The first, was simply experience – good teamwork, honed after fighting together for years. But three of them were Acton's guards, and they hadn't been with Femel for that long. This shouldn't be it.

So, it had to be a bloodline.

According to Micky, the guards shouldn't have one, which meant it belonged to the Holy Child. It appeared somewhat similar to Percy's ethereal cords, allowing Femel to communicate telepathically with the others. Reaching this conclusion, Elaine couldn't help but click her tongue.

'How troublesome.'

The guy with the most annoying affinity also happened to directly counter her magic. On top of that, he was the most experienced in the group, and he even held the key to their supernatural coordination. If that wasn't enough, he was also the very person the others were duty-bound to protect at all costs. Unfortunately, unless she found a way to take him out, she wouldn't be able to deal with the rest.

Shooting a blast of azure from her feet, Elaine leapt to the side, barely avoiding the purple arc smashing into the ground. The lightning caused the earth to split and the stone to shatter, the smell of ozone in the air intensifying.

But she didn't have the time to even think about that, two white-hot wolves attacking her from her sides, a third doing so from behind. At the same time, a cyclone was on course to collide with her head on, the rain of pure constructs not halting for even a moment.

Sighing, she pulled another chunk of mana from her cores, manifesting three tentacles. She knew her coat of bubbles wouldn't survive the attacks, so she had no choice but to exert herself some more to deal with the relentless onslaught.

The colossal tendrils spun around her, shattering the enemy spells with ease, giving her a chance to catch her breath. This only lasted for the briefest of instants though, her opponents not wasting any time before unleashing another round of attacks.

'I can't keep this up. I need to take the Green-born out, somehow… And I need to do it fast.'

It was easier said than done. Her tentacles were a medium-ranged attack. Very telegraphed, and not fast enough to reach her target before his domain ripped them to shreds. The only spell in her arsenal that could bridge the gap in an instant was her Demersal Sniping. But even asleep, the Blues had proven capable of reacting to the attack. They would notice the moment it entered their domain, giving them a chance to avoid it.

'I need to somehow hide it from their senses until the very last second.'

But how would she do that?

Domains were even better than Mana Sense, as they could wrap around an object from every direction rather than just the one facing the user. Elaine knew from her own experience that her opponents would be hard pressed to sneak up on her, and the opposite was likely true.

Defending herself from a couple more attacks, she scanned her surroundings, looking for anything she could use to conceal her spell.

There was nothing.

It was just a barren land. No way it could hide a Blue's magic. Other than everyone's spells, the only things that contained even more mana were their bodies.

Thinking of something, she couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

‘My body…’

Chapter 353: Crush

Elaine almost dismissed her idea by instinct. It was crazy. Nobody in their right mind would even consider doing something like that.

But playing with it in her head for a few seconds, she realized it might actually work. Scanning her hand with Mana Sense, she noticed the raging flow of Circulation inside her channels made it shine in a bright Blue colour. There was no way her enemies would see anything obscured by her flesh. Closing her palm, she gathered some mana inside it, before examining it with her domain too.

‘I can’t see it! It’s fully hidden!’

Her heart skipped a beat as she confirmed the viability of her plan. But she caught herself soon after.

‘Am I seriously going to do this?’

It would be a risky move. It would exhaust most of her mana and potentially leave her handicapped afterwards. Even if it worked, fighting against the remaining three Blues wouldn’t be easy in that state. If it failed, on the other hand, she would be done for. She very much doubted her opponents would give her a second chance.

Shaking her head, she shoved the idea to the back of her mind for now, trying to come up with an alternative.

But there was nothing. The enemy Blues kept pressuring her, nearly hitting her on multiple occasions over the next few minutes. Her mana dropped rapidly too. If she kept going like this, her boosting art would deactivate even before her mana ran dry, at which point she would be screwed.

Clenching her teeth, she realized her ridiculous plan was her only option.

Closing her fist again, she began accumulating mana once more. The condensed orb of water pressed against her skin, trying to pry her fingers open. But she didn't let it. She only gripped it more tightly, desperate to prevent the soft light of her nascent spell from spilling through the gaps.

At the same time, she continued to deal with her opponents' attacks in whatever way she could. She dodged some, blocking the rest with her tentacles or her bubbles. Meanwhile, she tried her hardest to keep her expression level and her movements natural, to not betray her intentions.

A few seconds later, she felt the spell was nearly ready.

Knowing this was it, she retracted and condensed her domain around her body, before expelling two powerful jets of water from her feet, shooting directly at Femel. She manifested four medium-sized tentacles too, wrapping them tightly around her body – both for her protection and theirs.

A flash of surprise coloured the Holy Child's face for the briefest of instants, but he remained calm, already reacting. He propelled himself backwards with his mana, clearly trying to buy time for his companions to help him.

Having covered about two thirds of the gap in an instant, Elaine unleashed her domain again, slamming it against the Green-born's. Hers had brute strength, while his fought back with finesse. Still, she overwhelmed him at first, at least until the other three domains attacked her from behind again, trying to rip hers apart.

Not letting that stop her, she continued to chase after Femel, unleashing her tentacles at him once more. The powerful constructs smashed the earth with tremendous force, causing the whole area to quake as the stone shattered beneath them, deep fissures snaking through the ground.

But the Holy Child evaded them, eating through his reserves rapidly to keep himself out of harm's way, doing everything he could to stay alive for a few seconds longer.

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Elaine was faster than him. Far stronger too. And they both knew it. Had they fought alone, he would have died a long time ago. Even now, it wouldn't be long until she landed a spell on him, putting the slippery bastard out of her misery.

Yet, this was time she didn't have.

The azure lines on her skin were already flickering in and out of existence, her strength on the verge of leaving her muscles. Meanwhile, a barrage of spells rained behind her, forcing her to keep dodging as the Green-born's teammates desperately fought to protect their leader.

The mages rushed through the Valley in three groups. First, there was a Holy Child running for his life, a burst of steam accompanying his every move. Elaine chased behind him, trying to commit the most heinous crime on Remior to protect her friends. Finally, three guards ran at the very back, doing everything in their power to stop her.

At the same time, the five domains continued to clash.

Sometimes, Elaine's tentacles fell within her own territory, empowered by her willpower as they descended upon the ground with savage force. Others, they landed inside Femel's domain instead, the tremendous heat evaporating them rapidly, trying to rob her of her weapons.

"Almost," she spat at some point.

Her face twisted into a grimace as she barely missed the Holy Child by a few inches. But she wasn't done. A second whip landed in front of him, cutting his escape route. That said, the impact was far weaker now, the constructs having been reduced to a fraction of their original size. And Elaine didn't have the spare mana to restore them either.

Noticing an arc of lightning about to hit her from behind, she used her third whip to parry the spell. The construct boiled on contact, the violent explosion nearly knocking her off her feet. But she held on, already trying to slap Femel down with the last of her tentacles.

Gritting his teeth, the Holy Child hastily formed a thick layer of steam in front of himself, barely managing to block the attack. The weakened spell evaporated almost instantly against the pale barrier, though not without peeling much of it off in the process.

Not deterred, Elaine retracted her domain once more, shrouding her body as she stepped forward. Punching through the steam with all her strength, she felt her skin flake off as blisters formed, the scorching heat eating through her willpower.

But her fist made it to the other side, connecting with Femel's jaw. She could tell, as there was no mistaking the touch of his bones cracking under her knuckle. The feeling was sickening, but she ignored it, knowing this wasn't the time to hesitate.

Her physical strength eclipsed his own severalfold, so the punch was bound to do some serious damage. That said, she didn't think it would be enough to kill him. Maybe, it wouldn't even knock him out.

That's why she didn't stop there, finally unleashing the spell she had been holding onto all this time. Elaine didn't even dare to open her fist, afraid the heat would sap away her spell's strength. Instead, she chose to sacrifice her hand to make sure the attack found its mark.

A wave of unimaginable force exploded outward, blowing whatever remained of the white barrier away in an instant, knocking Elaine off her feet. Not having the luxury to worry about the Green-born's fate, she clumsily rolled away as a cyclone rushed through her previous spot, nearly tearing her to shreds.

Pushing herself up again, she ignored the ringing in her ears and the two warm streams rolling down the sides of her neck. Lifting her eyes, she glanced at the devastation she had just unleashed.

There, on the ground, she saw a headless corpse, a crimson pool expanding outward from its severed neck, spilling into a massive crater behind it.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Abyssal Crush – Refined!]

As much as she would have loved a moment to appreciate the notification or to sigh in relief upon confirming the kill, she didn't get any of that. Her brain finally seemed to register the absence of her

limb, a wave of pure agony rushing over her. This was easily the second worst pain she had ever felt, losing only to the soul injuries Percy had inflicted upon her to grant her her new core.

Sadly, she knew she didn't have time to come to terms with that either.

Shifting her attention to the others, she noticed their shaken expressions. The poor bastards were probably lamenting the severe punishment they would no-doubt receive for letting a Holy Child die under their watch.

'You should be more worried about yourselves though.'

Sneaking in a couple of quick breaths, she replenished what mana she could as she rushed after them. Missing a hand and much of her reserves sucked, but her opponents had suffered an even greater loss. Not that Elaine had any intention of dropping her guard for even an instant, but she knew that dealing with the rest was more than doable.

'Percy… Nesha… I hope you guys are okay too…'

Chapter 354: Watchful guardian

"Don't ever attack me for any reason."

"Don't touch my guards either."

"Listen to what they tell you too, as long as it doesn't contradict my own commands."

"Don't try to harm yourself."

"Never stray too far from me."

"If your old master tries to get you to violate my orders, I want you to actively fight against his control."

Acton had spoken many commands over the years – many of them off-handedly. Yet, the weight of his bloodline had turned each of them into an inviolable chain wrapped around Micky's soul, forcing him to comply.

Whether it was his next promotion, or the Green-born's death that would first snap those chains, he didn't know. Perhaps, neither would, and he would simply remain a slave for a second lifetime. He tried not to think about that scenario too much, trusting that Percy and the others would rescue him from this hell.

Either way, these orders had posed quite a problem. Micky and Percy's clone had spent a lot of time before the start of the battle thinking about how to best navigate through their gaps.

Carefully dissecting their wording, it was clear that Percy wouldn't be able to turn Micky against their enemies. Even if he could have, it would have been risky to stay within earshot of them, as they could easily issue an amendment to deal with his dissent.

Fortunately, Acton's commands had plenty of blind spots. For instance, he had forbidden Micky from letting Percy help him violate his commands, but not from possessing him entirely. He had also never specified what "too far" meant, leaving it up to Micky's interpretation.

Of course, it wasn't like he could freely fly to the opposite side of Remior – Micky knew this would go against the Green-born's intentions, and that was enough for the command to take hold. That said, Micky genuinely felt that he was free to roam a couple dozen miles from Acton. After all, the Holy Child had explicitly allowed him to hunt by himself within that range in the past.

Thus, he and Percy had decided that their best course of action would be to simply slip away amidst the chaos and stay clear of the battles until it was all over. That didn't mean that they would be doing nothing in the meantime, however.

'There they are,' he thought, spotting a few humanoid silhouettes chasing another in the distance.

The sea of drifting globules lowered visibility greatly, but his passive Soul Vision allowed him to locate his targets. These were the Green guards, currently chasing Nesha through the Valley. Obviously, Micky couldn't afford to fly near them, let alone get in their way. Yet, he had another task here, no less

important. Gliding in a wide circle around the humans, he scanned the barren land for any opportunistic scavengers waiting to ambush the victors of the battle – hopefully just Nesha.

Micky and Percy weren't as worried about his main body or Elaine getting attacked. Fights between Blues were downright cataclysmic. Even the dumbest, hungriest beasts would have the sense to stay as far from those as possible. But them sneaking up on a weakened Nesha was something they had to watch out for.

Sure enough, it didn't take long for him to find a few. It was a small pack of monkeys. Seven Yellows accompanying a Green alpha. Gathering some air mana to his mutated feathers, Micky dove down at a great speed, aiming directly at the oversized monster.

The creature seemed to notice him at the last second, barely ducking in time to avoid getting its soul torn apart. Micky's talons still carved several deep gashes into the beast's back, however.

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Not even glancing at the monkey spasming in agony behind him, he grabbed two of the Yellows by the neck, sinking his beak into the chest of a third one.

The survivors were too stunned to react. By the time they managed, Micky had taken off. He was already circling back for a second attack, tossing the carcasses on the ground.

A few seconds later, the Green monkey was back to its feet, the fur on its legs painted red with blood as the soul damage caused it to shudder erratically. As for its henchmonkeys, they were already dead.

The alpha fought back, of course, but the poor thing had never stood a chance. Micky had already killed bigger and stronger Greens over the years. Percy might have asked him to hold back on improving his spells, but his understanding of his various mana types and of his own body had still grown tremendously after all this time in the Valley.

Swallowing the Green core whole, he took off once again, scanning the ravaged battlefield in the distance to figure out which way Nesha and the others had gone.

…and what other unlucky beast had made the mistake of shadowing them.

‘Micky…’ Percy’s clone suddenly spoke.

‘Hmm?’

‘We’ve done everything we could to prepare for this... But you know… there’s still a chance we lose.’ Percy said, his voice grim.

‘If that happens, you should escape to the Vault with your main body.’ Micky replied, not hesitating for even a moment to suggest that.

Opening a portal from Remior was a huge risk they would have preferred to avoid. Percy handing himself to Metatron on a silver platter was an even greater one. But it was better than dying, wasn’t it?

Percy shook his head, however.

‘No way. I won’t leave you or the others behind. Yet, you should do that. If we all get killed, there’s no point in you staying here. With my clone possessing you, we’ll be able to activate the Decree.’

A wave of horror gripped Micky’s heart at the mere thought of losing everyone he cared about in this battle. Just the fact they had all sacrificed so much to rescue him already filled him with guilt. But he knew it would be irresponsible of him to not at least discuss what to do in the worst-case scenario.

‘Can we even survive without your main body?’

Percy sighed.

‘I’ve asked Zoris. He doesn’t think so. Nobody can be entirely sure about anything related to my bloodline, but there’s a good chance my clones rely on the cords to survive. But I might last long enough to open a portal for you. And you may stick around for longer, since your soul is more independent than mine…’

Micky took a few seconds to ponder his friend's words. Eventually, he shook his head.

'And what would be the point of that?'

'What do you mean?'

'Percy… I never told you this, but I recovered a couple more memories since Gentlebreeze town.' he said, feeling some surprise seep through their bond. But he continued. 'It wasn't anything major – just bits and pieces from my captivity on Huehue. Nothing I particularly wanted to remember, really. All of it was sparked by my feelings under Acton's control.'

'Where are you going with this?'

'I… I want to remember the rest. And to take down the bastards who have ruined my home. I can't do any of that by myself.'

'But you can. Assuming you live long enough, of course. Metatron will likely shower you with resources. You are even more unique than the other beasts I've given him. He might figure a way to fix you up for good. If the stars align, you might even manage to attain divinity without me. Even if you can't, maybe you can convince Metatron to free Huehue in the future.'

'Right… But I don't want to. My fondest memories in this life are from our time together. Training every day to get stronger. Hunting the goblins and the wasps… Doing everything in our power to become gods, even when everyone told us we can't. Hiding and fighting and scheming against those who wish us harm… Always thinking about the best place to get our next drop of elixir from, or choosing the most useful spells to focus on… What fun would any of it be if I was all alone?'

Percy chuckled.

'You mean, you enjoyed that stuff? All this time, I honestly felt bad, dragging you through my nonsense.'

Micky laughed too.

‘Maybe it’s just nostalgia. I guess I was just a newborn chick at the time... Or it could be the part of your soul inside me speaking. Either way, all I want is for things to go back to the way they were… It’s been so long since that bastard cast his bloodline on me.’

Percy remained silent for a couple of seconds. Eventually, he spoke again.

‘I don’t want to die either. Obviously. But you’ve started over once before. I’m sure you can do it again. Besides, you won’t be alone in the Vault. There are others you can hang out with. Tlaloc is from Huehue like you. He can talk to you about your people. Maybe even jog another memory or two.’

‘I’d love to meet him – all of them. But they aren’t my family Percy… You are. So do us all a favour and kick that guy’s ass.’

Percy didn’t immediately respond, seemingly at a loss for words. Eventually, he nodded, however, a wave of determination rippling through their connection.

‘…Okay.’

Chapter 355: Mud

Percy chased Acton, though he had trouble catching up.

He was confident he would have killed him already if they had merely run on level ground. However, the Holy Child wasn’t that dumb, apparently, having recognized the threat he posed. Constantly expelling colossal amounts of mana from his body, the Green-born allowed it to mix with his domain, hiding himself inside an ever-expanding blob of mud. Like that, he put more and more distance from Percy, shielding himself from the attacks.

The storm of spinning scythes flew toward Acton from every direction, the man’s soul still visible beneath the sea of filth. Sadly, Percy had a hard time pinning him down. The fused mana had no issue phasing through the mud, yet it couldn’t ignore the domain embedded in the moving swamp. Every inch they travelled, the Harvesters slowed down, barely even budging by the time they neared their target. Meanwhile, the Holy Child swam through his mana like a fish in water, dodging the sluggish attacks with practiced ease.

As much as it pained Percy to admit it, this was the correct way to deal with him. After all, Acton was "only" two grades above him. For anyone else, this would have already been an insurmountable gulf, but he had already bridged a similar gap multiple times before, against the likes of Rambert and Jason. And he'd done that even before his recent power-ups.

The one advantage Acton had was his domain. But that was a huge thing, elevating Blues to a whole other level. The easiest way for the Holy Child to win was to weaponize it, using it to sap Percy's strength and augment his own. For that to work, he had to essentially set up his own private battleground, and force Percy to fight inside it for a prolonged period of time.

It appeared that he had realized it too, no longer the naïve child he'd once been. Acton should be in his thirties right now, having caught up with Percy due to his head-start in the Valley. Perhaps he didn't have as much combat experience, since the beasts here had never posed as much of a challenge for him, but he clearly possessed at least a basic grasp on strategy.

It had barely been a couple minutes since the two split off from Elaine and the other Blues, yet the Holy Child had already accumulated enough sludge to fill a small lake, without putting even a dent on his reserves. The mud had already expanded far enough to force Percy back, reaching dangerously close to his feet.

Acton was clearly content biding his time in preparation for a strong counterattack, having likely realized the situation was less favourable for Percy.

Sure enough, Percy's muscles already burned, his flesh and soul torn by his own boosting art as he fought against the Green-born's domain with everything he had. The pain alone helped him snap out of the mental component, but the effects of the Holy Child's domain were already tangible. It wasn't at Galahad's level, but it was strong enough to slow down his movements, his bones creaking under the pressure.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed through it with brute strength alone.

"It's you, isn't it?!" Acton suddenly asked.

Percy would have expected the Green-born's voice to sound muffled as it passed through dozens of metres of sludge, but that wasn't the case. It was strangely clear, as if resonating with the omnipresent domain to reach his ears.

"The previous owner of the crow… The one who got in my way before," the man continued, oblivious to his thoughts. "I admit, I thought about you once or twice over the years, wondering if you'd given up on rescuing your pet after all this time… Evidently, not."

He chuckled.

"To think you'd chase me – Me, of all people! – all the way to this place... I'm not sure whether I should commend your courage or laugh at your stupidity. Do you honestly think you stand a chance?"

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The Holy Child's voice turned colder near the end.

"Even if a little Orange-born rat like you were to beat me… then what? Do you think you'll be forgiven? For killing a Holy Child? That you'll be able to hide that bird of yours?! The only reason the Order hasn't thrown the little freak in a cage yet is because it's mine!"

Percy felt his blood boil upon hearing the Green-born's words. Pulling more ambient mana from his surroundings, he saw the teal wisps burn more brightly beside him. They hopped in and out of his soul erratically, filling him with new strength. The ribbons fluttering behind him grew longer, as both sets of channels stretched to their limits, saturating his body with mana.

A fresh wave of agony rippled through him, but he welcomed it, using it as another tool to resist the suffocating domain. The colour of his fused mana snaked a little closer to his cores, stopping just outside the silver and cyan stars thrumming in his sternum and abdomen.

'I have to take a risk. I can't let him keep building up mana.'

Deciding to take a gamble, he leapt on top of the rolling blob. His feet exploded with power as he shot forward, each splotching step leaving behind a short-lived crater in the mud as he tried his best not to sink. Staying atop the viscous sludge took less effort than the Mirror Lake's surface, but this wasn't a neutral battleground in the slightest.

The swamp shifted beneath his feet, constantly trying to knock him off balance. Colossal waves shaped like clawed hands rose from every direction, slapping down at him violently. Whenever his steps slowed for even a moment, the mud parted beneath his boots, trying to drag him down into its dark depths. Even worse, the domain grew stronger the closer he got to its source, the Blue mana amplifying its effects further.

Perhaps in an attempt to distract him, or maybe because he simply enjoyed hearing his own voice, the Holy Child spoke again.

"Well? Do you not understand that the bird is better off like this? Once I become a god, I might even find a way to keep it by my side. It might be alive for eons after your bones have turned to dust!"

Carefully scanning the tumultuous currents of sludge, Percy started seeing projections of the clawed hands a mere fraction of a second before they manifested. It wasn't much, but it gave him more room to evade them, letting him catch his breath a little. At the same time, he adjusted to his sluggish movements somewhat, slowly beginning to advance towards the centre of the blob, like a moth guided to the silver flame of Acton's soul.

Settling into a rhythm, he finally got the chance to respond to his opponent's taunts.

"You? Become a god? Why don't you try becoming a human first?"

Seeing that there was no point in attacking Acton until he got closer, he retracted whatever was left of his scythes, breaking them into pieces and pumping mana into the enchantments to increase their numbers again.

More clawed hands rose, each as tall as a tree. They fell at him from all sorts of insidious angles, trying to snuff the life out of him. Every now and then, one came close to succeeding, only for a flock of invisible scythes to spin through it, shredding it into a million pieces.

Like that, a Red-born and a Green-born fought, one doing his best to advance as the other strove to keep him at bay.

Sadly, this wasn't sustainable for Percy.

His stamina dwindled at a scary rate, the Dance breaking his own body apart from within. Left with no other choice, he gathered some mana to his arm, breaking four of the twelve leaves on his tattoo. A rush of life mana flooded his body, though the effect wasn't as potent as it used to be. It did alleviate some of his exhaustion, and it even patched some of his wounds up, but it didn't take long for his skin to tear again, undoing his efforts.

'I can't get any closer…'

Percy's steps slowed down once again, his feet already sinking a couple of inches into the mud each time. By now, his fatigue affected him as much as the domain did, if not more. Worse still, he had yet to close even half the distance to Acton. He wouldn't be able to attack him like this.

But what choice did he have?

Should he try to escape? Wait for Elaine to win her own battle? But what if she needed his help for that? Would Acton even let him get away?

No. This wasn't an option. They'd fought for so long to create this opportunity. He couldn't afford to squander it. Micky had spent decades in the bastard's clutches. And it wasn't the crow's first time suffering like this either. He had spent an entire lifetime stuck in a damp cell, before dying a horrific death. This was supposed to be different – his second chance to live a better life!

Was he really destined to endure the same cruel fate again? Before he even got to recover his lost memories?!

'I'd sooner die than let that happen.'

Gathering mana to his back, he broke the trollsfury tattoo. All of it. His boosting art was already difficult to bear, so straining his body further was ill-advised. But it wouldn't matter anyway, if things stayed like this.

His veins bulged as the fire mana burned a path toward his chest. Then, it reached his heart and…

…all hell broke loose.

Chapter 356: Pieces and links

If Percy's body had felt like a furnace before, it was now closer to a volcano's magma chamber.

Every inch of his flesh convulsed with each violent heartbeat, small rivulets of blood streaming out of tiny holes in his vessels. His higher grade and the life mana muted the side-effects to an extent. That said, he'd injected himself with a lot of ink, and his body had already been on the verge before. Some of his bones cracked under the strain, his skin painted crimson from head to toe.

If there was one silver lining, the boost to his physique allowed him to better endure the pressure in his channels, making his mana network the only thing to actively benefit from his gamble.

At least, that was the case at first.

But Percy hadn't used the tattoo for a chance to relax – he'd done it to win. Taking advantage of his higher capacity, he pushed even more mana into his channels, soon hitting his new limit again.

It hurt… so fucking much.

Yet, he didn't care – he was only getting started. Today, he'd kill that bastard, if it was the last thing he did.

As if responding to his emotions, the teal wisps grew even larger, some faint features appearing on them for the first time since Melodia. Percy didn't have the mental capacity to examine the faces, but he didn't miss their shrill cries as they sucked in all the ambient mana around him.

Dancing around and through his soul, they left blazing trails behind them, almost resembling a second set of ribbons. Their paths were curved and seemingly random, spiralling in and out of the maelstrom in his chest. At the same time, the teal ribbons of corporeal mana ignited too, flames of the same colour now burning erratically as they fed into his pure channels.

Somehow, the two flavours of the boosting art had begun to resemble each other more closely, as the fused mana flowing through his body finally broke through the final barrier, spilling into his cores.

Just like that, the Dance clicked together with Synchronization in Percy's mind, yet his Status remained silent, seemingly waiting patiently for something more.

Two teal stars now thrummed in unison inside Percy's torso, his feet breaking into motion. Dashing atop the dark swamp with unprecedented speed, he left the clawed hands far behind him as all his surroundings turned blurry. His mutated eyes had to work overtime to make out the details as he closed the distance to Acton far faster than ever before.

Seemingly realizing that something was off, the Green-born stopped conserving his strength, pumping mana out with thrice his previous intensity. The blob of sludge swelled, the domain growing even more suffocating as the clawed hands formed faster, trying to cut Percy's path.

In addition to that, a series of smaller, more insidious constructs formed. Lots of thin snakes shot at Percy through the gaps in the giant digits, trying to stab him full of holes, or perhaps to wrap around his joints.

To counter Acton's spells, the teal wisps flared toward the scythes on their own, igniting their curved edges. The weapons now spun faster, drawing and converting ambient mana to fuel their own enchantments. Repairing and duplicating themselves, they fought against the Green-born's attack.

And with that, the Dance clicked together with the Infinite Harvest too, but Phoebe's Decree had nothing to say about it.

In mere seconds, Percy found himself at a spot right above his opponent, dancing between the colossal hands and the twisting snakes as he hurled his constructs at Acton by the dozens.

The Holy Child wasn't done yet, however.

Clearly realizing he had to change tactics, Acton stopped advancing. He focused his efforts on his domain, slowing down the incoming attacks even more, swimming through his mana skilfully to evade the lethal blows.

At the same time, the vast stretches of mud that they had left behind over the past few minutes flowed like rivers towards them, joining the rest of the swamp. What used to be a blob of sludge was quickly turning into a maelstrom – a real one – as the mud swirled around Acton and Percy, rising a hundred metres into the air. More clawed hands formed, shooting at Percy from both above and below.

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Gritting his teeth, Percy focused on defence once more, relying on the short-lived projections afforded to him by the Grim Battlefield to avoid falling into their grasp.

At some point, he missed a step, however.

Not due to any mistake on his part, but simply because his knee finally buckled under his weight, unable to endure the strain any longer.

Percy barely managed to roll out of the way as three hands splashed in quick succession where he'd stood a moment ago. Struggling to climb back to his feet, he realized his muscles and his bones had already reached their limits. ₹ÀNộ₱ÊŠ

'This can't be it… There has to be more I can do…'

Another hand was about to hit him, three snakes shooting at him from various angles.

Thinking of something in his desperation, he commanded the mana in his channels as he normally did with his scythes, forcefully bypassing his muscles to push his body out of the way. Like a puppet, he darted to the side, his flesh now animated by the willpower in his mana.

Realizing this was a promising way to keep fighting, Percy capitalized on his idea. Every inch of his body was currently saturated with mana – more so than ever before. Relying on it, he dragged his limbs around as if they were his constructs, dancing between Acton's attacks.

At first, his movements were clumsy, as he wasn't used to fighting like this. But it didn't take him long to notice he could apply the same principles behind his Vengeful Weapons spell to control his body more efficiently. In fact, he could do the same with his armour, pushing his flesh around from inside out!

Partially surrendering control to his mana, he worked alongside it, while drawing whatever strength still lingered in his muscles, flying through the spinning maelstrom of mud even faster. Leveraging the otherworldly assistance of his mana, he stepped, and pivoted and rolled atop the filth in all sorts of unnatural ways, expanding his fighting style in directions he had never even dreamt of before today.

This time, the Infinite Harvest formed a tentative link with the Grim Battlefield in his head, as he understood that his body was really just another weapon, just like his weapons were an extension of his body. Another piece fell into place, bringing the boosting art closer to perfection.

He wasn't the only one growing stronger, however.

The maelstrom grew larger and larger as the final patches of mud reached them. Percy could tell Acton was improving too, manipulating his constructs with growing finesse. It wasn't that strange either, if he thought about it. This was quite possibly the first time in the Holy Child's life that he got driven to a corner. Just like the Green-born had forced Percy past his limits, so had Percy done for him.

Realizing his time was running out, Percy consumed four more of the green leaves on his arm, repairing some of the damage in his body to keep going. The mana interfered with the trollsfury tattoo this time, robbing both of some of their efficacy. Luckily, Percy had grown used to his evolving spell by now – enough to maintain it regardless.

His eyes darted around the battlefield, the projections growing more distinct as he adjusted to his new speed. Below the surface, countless scythes closed into Acton, trying to sink their burning edges into his soul. Above it, Percy evaded one attack after the other – both real and unrealized – his body drifting like a boat amidst a storm, animated by blood and willpower both.

The Green-born wouldn't go down so easily though.

At some point, he managed to surround Percy with four clawed hands, and just as many snakes. According to the projections afforded to him by the Grim Battlefield, he only had two viable escape routes. He could try to roll through a tiny gap to his left, though a fifth hand would manifest on the other side if he did. Alternatively, he could try jumping vertically, though that wasn't exactly a safe option either.

Not having time to think deeply about it, he chose the second path.

That was when the blazing ribbons beside him shifted once more. Reacting to his momentary indecision, his mana acted on its own, a teal wisp shooting away by itself. Not in a random direction though. It sank directly into the projection – Percy's projection – from the future he had just ignored!

Drawing torrents of ambient mana, it expanded, stretching into Percy's armoured figure, breathing life into the forsaken shadow. Of course, it was little more than a hollow shell – a mere illusion that would crumble at the slightest touch. It wouldn't take more than a glance to tell it apart from the real Percy either.

But it seemed to have caught Acton by surprise regardless.

In the heat of the moment, the Holy Child ended up splitting his focus into two, manifesting a pair of smaller hands instead, trying to attack both figures. The first clawed at the illusion, phasing through it harmlessly. As for the second, it went after the real Percy, but it was weak enough that he could dispatch it rather easily with a couple of scythes flying nearby.

With that, a fourth and final link was established, this time between the Dance and the Grim Battlefield.

Once more, there was no notification, however. Of course not – as Percy had yet to explore the new spell to his satisfaction! He knew he had barely even tapped into its potential, and his Status seemed to understand that just as well.

Glancing at the silver silhouette inside Acton's body, his lips curled upwards. It was clearly shaken this time, the flame burning erratically, brimming with fear.

As it should…

Chapter 357: Fireworks

Panicking, Acton allowed his domain and his mana to expand outward. Grabbing thousands of drifting globules, along with several colossal chunks of dirt and rock from his surroundings, he forced them into the maelstrom of mud. If his mana wasn't enough, he'd have to supplement it with mundane matter from outside!

The walls of sludge rose even higher than before, spinning with renewed fury. More constructs formed, piling toward his opponent one after the other.

But it was futile!

This… creature… it grew faster and stronger with each passing second. Acton couldn't see him clearly through the swamp, but he could feel him through Mana Sense, and through the shifts in his domain.

'Is he really an Orange-born?!'

It was unbelievable! The mana surrounding that person was merely Yellow – of that, there was no doubt. Yet, there was so much of it! It trailed behind him as if he were a comet, smashing into the mud with the force of a meteor, dancing between Acton's constructs with the grace of a snake.

And the way he commanded his mana and body was unlike anything Acton had ever seen. Every drop of mana in that person's channels seemed to respond to his will, moving alongside his muscles as he shot through the battlefield. Ambient mana kept rushing toward him, constantly fuelling his every action, allowing him to even compete with a Blue!

'Just… how did it come to this?'

Acton was happy with how his trip to the Valley had gone. He was still some time away from Violet, but he knew he'd get there. It shouldn't be long before his crow reached Green either – it couldn't be, since it had been stuck at Yellow for ages. Once Acton emerged out of the training holy land, he would finally have the strength to carve a name for himself inside the Order!

So why… just why did this have to happen?!

Where had this monster come from?!

At the beginning, Acton had actually enjoyed the fight. It was his first time getting pushed to this extent. He'd progressed more today than after countless years of killing those useless Green beasts. So, where exactly had it all gone wrong?!

A violent impact shook the entire swamp, breaking him out of his thoughts. It was followed by a second. And a third. That man continuously slammed into the mud with tremendous power as he jumped from one surface to another. Sometimes, he stepped on the flat stretch of sludge near the centre of the maelstrom. Other times, he leapt onto the vertical walls swirling around them at ridiculous speeds.

'Is he a person, or a frog?!'

Most curiously, wisps of burning mana splintered away with every leap, shooting at random directions. They formed dancing figures no different from the Orange-born, messing with Acton's senses. Identifying the real one was never particularly hard, but it was irritating. That man kept producing more illusions, constantly disappearing into the growing crowd.

'What a bizarre spell…' Acton couldn't help but think.

The booming explosions resembled fireworks. And… those orbs orbiting the armoured figure… at first, Acton hadn't heard anything coming from them, but their shrill cries had made their way to his ears at some point. He couldn't tell what exactly they were doing though. Were they crying? Or laughing?

He couldn't tell.

'Ah, what am I even thinking?!'

He shook his head. This wasn't the time to marvel at his opponent's magic. He might actually die if this continued. Those burning scythes kept flying closer and closer to Acton, gnawing at his domain with each savage slash as their numbers continued to grow.

Out of options, he split the swamp in two, overturning the top half over the man's head. The bottom half, he dragged with him, shooting away toward the nearest boundary of the Valley.

'That ought to buy me some time…' he thought.

Well, he was wrong.

Glancing behind him with Mana Sense, Acton saw the man leap off the top of the maelstrom just in time to roll over the tumbling wall of mud, already hot on his trail. Dozens of weapons spun through the sludge too, completely unfazed by the cataclysmic spell.

Gritting his teeth, Acton released more mana, soon recovering a fraction of the discarded mud. The expanding blob continued to roll away, carrying him toward salvation. It wasn't until a few seconds later that he realized he wouldn't make it. The man's scythes had already reached him again, digging through his defences once more. They'd last for a while, but not nearly long enough for him to escape. Pushed to a corner, Acton switched to diplomacy.

"Okay, you got me! How about this? I'll get you a pardon for killing my guards! I'll even give you a couple decades' worth of elixirs too, as your reward for helping me improve! That has to be enough, right? Just let me go!"

No response.

Acton didn't miss the man's mana flaring violently though, his gaze growing colder. For some reason, his plea had clearly had the exact opposite of the intended effect...

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“Come on, you can’t be serious about killing me, can you?! I’m a Green-born! I could become a god one day! Remior’s shield against the monsters outside!”

The man closed in on him, countless ghostly figures dancing by his side. At first, they resembled the armoured person himself, but their appearance changed upon hearing Acton’s words.

Some grew taller, others short. Male and female, slim and burly. There was a crying woman… a toddler no older than five or six, with a head of curly hair… a bald man with an eyepatch covering his left eye… a petite woman with a bulge in her belly…

Their faces seemed familiar, but Acton couldn’t quite place them.

“The people of Goldenfield town…” the Orange-born hissed, his voice hoarse and dripping with venom. “…are you going to protect them too?!”

Acton’s eyes widened as he finally put two and two together. But how was this possible? Was this man even human? Or was he the devil himself, sent from the pits of hell to drag him back with him?!

The figures danced closer to Acton. He shot one construct after another at them – spears, snakes, clawed hands, even random splashes of mud… They all passed through them, not as much as scratching them. Only when he infused part of his domain into the attacks did he pierce through the spectres, but that didn’t seem to affect them at all. The figures continued to approach, their wounds closing almost immediately.

“Just… keep those creepy things away from me! I’ll do anything if you let me go! You can have your bird back… Please!”

More figures appeared. Many he recognized, but others he didn’t. They weren’t all humans either… There was a girl without pupils, her wavy hair reaching her shoulders. There was a boy with a mane like a lion’s, a couple whiskers adorning his upper lip, wearing a fancy uniform… A humanoid creature with transparent skin, whose organs Acton could see pulsing beneath... A boy with fangs jutting out of his mouth, wearing a pair of wooden sandals… Some kind of creature with webbed digits and gills on his neck… There was a naked dude too for some reason, his body covered in dense fur from head to toe.

They all wielded the same scythes as their master. Anywhere from two to six of them, their shafts rolling and pivoting elegantly along their limbs as their curved blades drew burning arcs through the air. The figures themselves were hollow – mere illusions – but the weapons were real. Acton could tell, having suffered greatly at their edges already.

Was it the figures who clung to the weapons, following their movements? Or was it the weapons responding to the ghosts' wills?

Acton didn't know. He wasn't sure his opponent did either. But it didn't matter.

Eventually, his core ran dry, the blob of sludge around him slowly whittled down to nothing. With his mana gone, he crawled backwards along the dirt, staring at the army of dancing figures with horror. Retracting his domain as much as possible, he forced it to condense into a thin layer above his skin – a final shell to protect him from the demons.

Uncaring about his defences, the spectres flew at him one after the other. Their weapons shattered into shrapnel and sparks as they collided with his domain, each violent impact sending his very will into turmoil. The losses didn't seem to deter the ghosts in the slightest. They simply forged more scythes to keep going, each slash leaving a tiny dent into his makeshift armour.

By now, they were close enough for Acton to examine them more closely. Their eyes were cold, yet they still burned with hatred, somehow. He even pieced together the meaning behind their shrieks. They were mourning their deaths – the lives he had taken from them. And they were also celebrating… the vengeance they were about to serve!

'No! Not like this!'

Unwilling to go down, Acton pushed what little mana he'd managed to recover into the ground. It wasn't much, but it could certainly kill the bastard if he got a good shot at him.

Not letting his expression betray his plan, he continued to crawl away as the man calmly followed, waiting for him to step over the trap. It was humiliating, running away from an Orange-born. A bottom feeder.

But he'd do what he had to, to survive. Nobody would know anyway. It would just be a lesson for Acton to remember – to mind who he provoked in the future. To not underestimate the low-borns… the crazy bloodlines they might have…

As soon as the man set foot over his mana, Acton forced it to jut upward in the form of a spear, focusing on speed and piercing power above all else.

The armoured figure sidestepped the attack effortlessly, however, having somehow seen through it. Shooting forth, he landed over a dozen slashes on Acton's domain in an instant, the ethereal blades managing to slice through the armour this time. The wounds themselves were shallow – barely sinking half an inch into his body. They didn't draw any blood either.

But the pain was immeasurable.

Having never experienced anything of the sort, Acton folded over, puking out yesterday's dinner as he stared at the figure looming over him through a screen of tears and snot. As a last resort, he focused what remained of his domain into a single point, shooting a powerful blast at his opponent from up close.

The man barely raised his scythes in time, both of their shafts shattering as his chest plate caved in. His feet dug deep trenches into the ground as he slid back for dozens of metres, a trickle of blood snaking down his helmet as he came to a halt.

But he didn't collapse, his monstrous eyes still glowing under the shadow of his visor, stabbing right through Acton's soul. They looked just like they had that day, all those years ago…

The spectres rushed Acton once more, and he was completely defenceless this time.

One… two… five… ten…

The cuts didn't even hurt at this point, darkness seeping into his vision, his body already collapsing. Among the dancing crowd, a strange figure caught Acton's attention for some reason that he couldn't quite explain.

He wasn't one of the peasants he had killed. He wasn't even human. Just another of the strange monsters. But he felt a little different from the rest. It was a young boy, with two pairs of arms. A long beak in place of a mouth or nose, and a few tribal tattoos visible on his exposed skin. Acton had no idea who this person was, but his gaze felt familiar. It burned with cold hatred, even greater than his master's.

The last thing Acton felt was the cold ground pressing against his face, his consciousness fading.

An azure sky flashed through his memories, the sun shining brightly over his head. He was standing atop the tallest peak of that mountain, marvelling at the sea of clouds below. This place… it was where the chosen ones walked. The pride and hope of Remior… Acton… he just… All he'd ever wanted had been to stand tall here. To be respected by his peers. To be the centre of their attention – the object of their envy…

Was it such a huge crime?

What did these peasants even know?! With their worthless lives, clawing for centuries to reach Blue or White, just to lead one of those pathetic Houses of theirs. As if it was some grand achievement – for an ant to lead other ants. Who did they think they were, judging the likes of him?!

But then…

He couldn't help but think back to the monstrous opponent who had reduced him to this pitiful state. The elegant dance that had shredded his spells and ground his domain to dust. The army of spectres that had unleashed their unholy vengeance upon him, dragging him back to hell with them.

Acton's final thought was a sobering one.

'That place… maybe you belong there too…'

Chapter 358: Bonus loot

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Synchronization – Refined + Dance of the Savage Gods – Masterful + Wild Art: Grim Battlefield – Masterful + Infinite Harvest of Souls – Masterful -> …]

[…Wild Art: Carnival of the Savage Gods – Masterful!]

Percy drew a sharp breath upon reading the notification. His decades-long efforts had finally born fruit, granting him a spell to truly be proud of.

That was when he remembered that his body was a mess.

Glancing down at what remained of his armour, he took a moment to appreciate how pristine it was. It shone in a pale teal colour, unmarred by blood or dirt. In the end, he'd never learned how to draw those fancy self-cleaning runes he'd enjoyed during his stay at the Guild, but he didn't really need them, as he could just phase his Regalia through the grime.

Storing the components in his spatial seal, his body collapsed like a broken toy without his willpower holding it up. The glowing lines on his skin faded rapidly as mana spilled out of his pores, his muscles deflating in the process.

With a thought, he manifested a bunch of healing potions directly into his stomach, allowing the life mana to spread through his body, undoing some of the damage. Admittedly, his seal partially infringed on the benefits of his ink, as it made drinking the potions just as easy as using the tattoos. That said, there was still value in injecting the mana directly into his skin, as it was more effective that way.

In any case, the first few potions barely alleviated some of his pain, so he had no choice but to drink more of them. It wasn't until he'd consumed over a dozen that he could even twitch his fingers. That was fine though. They'd brought plenty into the Valley, and they'd never really had to use them before now.

Guzzling them down as if they were water, he repaired what he could. Completely replenishing the lost blood and eliminating the final traces of his injuries wouldn't happen immediately. He'd have to eat a few meals too, to help with that.

But he'd gathered enough strength to at least stand about half an hour later.

A piercing shriek soon reached his ears, a vast shadow blotting out the azure ceiling as a monstrous bird dove toward him. Percy's lips curled into a smile at the sight, not worried about the intruder.

Why should he be? This was just his familiar, after all.

“Missed you, buddy…”

Not that they hadn’t kept in touch over the years. Hell, he’d even sent a clone into the bird’s body a bunch of times – there was one currently in there too. But it was different, finally seeing his friend in person again. Free, after decades of captivity.

A cloud of dust rose as the oversized crow landed next to him. Micky headbutted him playfully on his chest, feelings of warmth seeping through their connection. Next, the bird turned his gaze toward the corpse.

The body itself didn’t have a single scratch on it, but Acton’s soul had already dissipated, unable to maintain its integrity after the countless brutal strikes it had endured. His core had cracked too, already starting to break down. But it held for now, as it hadn’t suffered much damage during the actual fight, and its higher grade allowed it to persist a little longer than most.

“All yours.” Percy said.

Micky didn’t need to be told twice, sinking his beak into the man’s torso, crushing the bloody gem before swallowing it. How fitting was it, that the first human Micky ate since receiving the Holy Child’s sadistic command was none other than the Green-born himself?

Not stopping at just the core, the crow continued, devouring the body piece by piece, until nothing remained. By the time he was done, Percy noticed several strands of Green had finally appeared inside Micky’s sternum.

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‘About damn time…’

It felt a bit slow, considering how many cores Micky had eaten over the years. Then again, this was already his first core's third promotion. For humans, it was supposed to take anywhere from 166 to 1000 years – depending on the type of elixirs they used. Meanwhile, the crow had reached this point in around 20.

The bird would need a little more food to complete the promotion, however. Turning his head to his right, Percy noticed somebody approaching. A single lean figure, dragging her feet along the ground as a large bubble of water floated beside her, six corpses swirling inside.

'Thank Phoebe she made it too…' Percy thought as he looked at his cousin.

He would have tried to help her if he could have, but he hadn't been in any condition to keep fighting. Luckily, it didn't look like she'd needed it.

The water came splashing down once she reached them, the corpses landing in front of Micky. Elaine gave the crow a huge hug with her remaining arm, before letting him resume his meal. Then, she turned to Percy, embracing him too.

"Are you alright?" he asked with a frown as he noticed her bleeding stump.

"It hurts like hell, but I'll be fine." she replied.

Percy nodded. A severed limb wasn't enough to take a Blue out. Nor was it a permanent injury – especially for a member of House Avalon. Then again, it wasn't something a bunch of healing potions could fix – certainly not when separated by three grades. She'd probably have to return home for this…

"How's Nesha?" Elaine asked.

He sighed, bringing her up to speed. Unlike his cousin, it hadn't been difficult to catch up with his girlfriend after taking Acton out, as she had a clone with her. Apparently, she'd won too, having eliminated all five of her opponents. Micky had watched over her, staying by her side until she replenished most of her mana.

Though she'd told him to fly back by himself, to get to the Blue cores sooner, before they degraded. Everyone knew the luxurious meal would most likely be enough to finally catalyse his evolution, so they didn't want him to miss it. It was the least he deserved, after all the shit he'd gone through.

As for Nesha, she was currently walking back by herself. She was still a few minutes away, having travelled pretty far while getting chased by the Greens.

Micky let out a loud screech at some point, drawing their attention.

The corpses were already gone, the crow's core having completed its promotion. A Green star now burned brightly inside his sternum. Micky's body shuddered, his flesh squirming, demanding more food for its evolution.

"Need help?" Percy asked.

"It's fine. I'll manage." Micky shook his head.

Next, he took off, probably scouring the land for any unlucky beasts he could find. It had already been a few days since the last shipment, so there hadn't been too many to begin with, but he was bound to find some.

Leaving his familiar to do his thing, Percy helped Elaine stitch up her wound to stop the bleeding. He handed her a pile of potions too. They didn't do much, other than closing the wound a little and relieving some of her fatigue.

Nesha arrived too after a while. Her eyes fell on Elaine first, staring at her stump in concern. The Blue just waved her worries away, telling her the same thing she had told Percy. As if remembering something, she then took a bunch of cubes from her robes. Six of them – one from each of her fallen opponents, as well as the two who had died at the start of the battle. Nesha followed suit, though she only had two of them.

"The other three didn't survive my spell. I've already stuffed what elixirs I could salvage into the other amulets," she explained.

Percy nodded. Walking up to where Acton's body had been a while ago, he picked up the final cube from the ground. The guards they had killed outside Goldenfield town hadn't had too many elixirs on them – only a couple weeks' worth. They had probably intended to restock their supplies upon reaching Twilight City, though they never got the chance.

This was different, however.

According to Micky's intel, the Root gave everyone who entered the Valley enough to last a decade. Whenever they ran out, they had to get more outside the Decree. Acton's guards were already on their third batch, and they should still have over seven years each!

Meanwhile, Femel's men had carried even more, since they had entered the Valley more recently. Not to mention the Holy Children themselves. Tallying everything, the trio counted about 38,000 doses in total!

Adding that to their current stash, they already had enough for nearly six years of Aurora Dew for everyone! That said, only about six months were already brewed, and Percy would have to leave the Valley before he brewed the rest.

Still, having more storage space than they knew what to do with, they had bought a ton of secondary ingredients too before leaving the city. Right now, they had everything they needed to not worry about elixirs for the foreseeable future.

"All that's left is to deal with the mess we've just made…" he said, eliciting a round of sighs from his companions.

Well, that was tomorrow's problem. Today was a day for celebration.

After all, they'd achieved everything they'd set out to do. They'd rescued their friend, advanced their cores, improved their spells, and even got a bonus stash of elixirs in the process. Piling onto the good news, Micky returned less than an hour later, his evolution complete.

Suffice to say, he looked very different than he had just minutes ago…

Chapter 359: New mutations

The size increase was the single most predictable thing about Micky's evolution – it was standard for Green beasts to grow about as large as elephants, so Percy should have obviously expected it.

Perhaps he shouldn't have been this shocked then, as he craned his neck up to gaze at the colossus standing in front of him. In his defence, he couldn't help but compare the current Micky to the tiny chick that used to stand in his palm, too small to eat a single mouse in one sitting.

'Well, I guess we're the mice now…'

Instinctively, he glanced back at his companions, to make sure he wasn't the one who had shrunk. Micky now towered over everyone, standing twice as tall as an adult human. His wingspan stretched even wider than that, casting a massive shadow on all three of them with plenty of shade to spare as the bird gleefully showed off.

"Do you think we'll be able to ride him?" Elaine asked, some excitement seeping into her voice, though it was somewhat muted by the pain of her missing limb.

"I think so." Percy nodded.

Technically, Micky had already been more than powerful enough at Yellow to fly while carrying three humans – especially with his boosting arts active. Sadly, they hadn't even tried it, since they knew his smaller size would have made it quite awkward. Right now, it looked like they should be able to sit rather comfortably behind his neck though. As for their weight, he wouldn't even feel it.

"This is going to be a problem later, isn't it?" Nesha suddenly asked, clearly less optimistic about the changes.

She wasn't wrong. Even before, the crow had been hard to miss while flying in the distance, but this would be far worse. People would easily spot him from several miles away, and he would definitely raise a lot of commotion too. Green beasts weren't that common. A flying monster soaring over populated areas was rarer still, as well as dangerous enough to scare any sane person out of their mind.

Not to mention that everyone on Remior had heard about the two-cored crow the dead Holy Child had flaunted around. It wouldn't be long until people drew the connection to the giant bird.

Percy sighed.

“We’ll talk about that stuff later.”

Figuring out what to do after leaving the Valley was certainly a huge item on their agenda, but not right now. Tired as everyone was from the hellish fights, they all deserved some rest. Percy wanted nothing more than to switch his brain off for a few hours, taking some time to appreciate all the good things they had struggled so hard for.

Scanning his familiar again, he paid closer attention to the other changes.

Micky’s previous mutations had remained, but they had expanded to cover even more of his body. His magical feathers now adorned both sides of his wings, as well as his back and tail, leaving only his head and underbelly unaffected. Their colour had changed again, now a much paler green, resembling snow more than grass.

Upon further examination, the feathers sported a faint silver tint as well. To Percy’s mutated eyes, it was clear there wasn’t just air mana sticking to them anymore, but also traces of ice and soul mana. Brushing his hand against his familiar’s plumage, he noticed it was quite cold to the touch. Even more curiously, this wasn’t regular cold. The feeling seemed to seep directly into his soul, causing him to shiver.

“Weird. Have you noticed any difference while flying?” he asked.

“Not really.” Micky shook his head. “I played around with them on the way back. They work like before, though I think they’ll help me unleash deadlier attacks.”

Percy nodded.

Now that Micky was finally free, he couldn’t wait for the two of them to start exploring his capabilities – both old and new. His familiar had been forced to sit the previous battle out, but that didn’t mean he was weak. Not even close. After some practice, he was confident the crow would be able to hold his own against Blues too.

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In any case, the changes to the bird's feathers were just the result of his old Wind Dancer and Soul Predator mutations. The two seemed to have grown even stronger, blending together and gaining a few new properties. But that wasn't everything.

Examining the crow carefully, Percy could tell there was more. There was a lot of mana sticking to Micky's veins. And not just the beast mana that normally circulated there. It was water mana.

'A water-based mutation?!'

Percy's heart skipped a beat. This was the one thing he was hoping for the most. He didn't even know what it did yet, but just having it was massive. It meant the crow would be able to use Regulation with all his mana types right now, which should help with his hunger.

"Micky, do you mind if I draw some blood from you?"

The bird shrugged, stretching his colossal wing, lowering it in front of Percy. Gathering some pure mana to his finger, Percy sharpened it into a tiny knife, carving a small incision on his familiar's flesh, at a spot where a lot of water mana flowed. Reshaping the cyan knife into a small cup, he collected some of the bird's blood, swirling it around to discern its properties.

"What the hell?! Is this even blood? It looks like water!" Elaine exclaimed.

The liquid was almost transparent, a faint red tint barely betraying its origin. It looked rather thin too. Putting some on his fingers, Percy rubbed them together, noticing it wasn't very sticky either.

He frowned.

There was no doubt this was new, but he struggled to imagine what the purpose of it was. Actually, was there even one?

Useless bloodlines existed. Even detrimental ones did. And not just mixed bags like the one House Tantalus had. Unlike Rambert's Drain that had some useful features, some blighted bloodlines were purely negative, without a single saving grace. So, it wasn't that much of a stretch to imagine the same could be true for mutations.

"Micky, how hungry are you feeling right now?" he asked, thinking of something.

The bird fell silent for a few seconds, seemingly pondering over Percy's question. He had already solved the worst of his hunger years ago, upon learning to keep both Regulation and Circulation active, though he hadn't eliminated the problem completely.

Of course, he hadn't complained about it since then, partly because they'd had bigger issues to deal with, and partly because he'd had access to a veritable buffet of powerful beasts during his stay in the Valley. Still, they all knew things wouldn't be as simple after they left. His second core's advancement had helped a lot, yet that was just temporary relief. Right now, Micky's hunger should have already returned with a vengeance – normally speaking.

"Hmmm… It's there, but it's not as bad as I was expecting. Definitely better than it used to be when my second core was at Orange," he said after a while.

'Could it be?' Percy wondered, his familiar's response pretty much confirming his guess.

Opening his Status, he glanced at Micky, pulling up the extended section of the Decree.

___

Mictlantecuhtli (Percival's familiar)

Mana cores:

Mutations:

Spectral trait:

Spells:

Decrees:

___

“Two new mutations…” he muttered, raising an eyebrow.

Leaving aside the fourth one for now, he focused on the crow’s strange blood, more than happy with its description. This was easily the most valuable part about Micky’s evolution!

Things should have been stable for the time-being, but there was no guarantee the crow’s first core wouldn’t advance again before the other one. Now, it seemed this might not even be as problematic as Percy had thought. Between the new mutation and the crow’s ability to use Regulation better, they would probably be fine for a while longer.

After sharing his thoughts with Micky and asking him to expand his Wild Art to cover his veins too, he then shifted his attention to the fourth and final mutation, racking his brain to figure out what it did. Its effect wasn’t as obvious as the other three. In fact, it took Percy several minutes to even identify which body part it had affected.

Carefully scanning his familiar from beak to talon, he concluded that it covered pretty much his entire body, though its function was still a mystery. This one seemed to be fuelled solely by ice mana. Not much of it either. Mere traces, subtle enough that anybody without Percy’s eyes would have missed them. Even after spending a lot of time coming up with various ideas and testing a few things with Micky, he failed to dispel the question marks from the bird’s Status.

Was this one useless then? Or merely dormant, the circumstances not right for it to reveal its purpose yet?

“Oh well… Three mutations are good enough for now...”

He shrugged.

If the fourth one did anything, they’d figure it out sooner or later.

Chapter 360 – A meeting of gods (1)

A magnificent temple stood at the very peak of the tallest mountain on Remior. The thick marble pillars were adorned with the most intricate runes, humming like coiled songbirds ready to burst into chorus – another of Hephaestus’s masterpieces.

Admittedly, their local branch of runecrafting wasn’t as developed as that on other worlds, but it wasn’t due to the god’s lack of talent. There was a limit to how much a single person could do to advance an entire field by themselves – ignoring a few monstrous individuals, of course, such as a notorious pentapus famous in the entire universe for his unprecedented achievements.

‘He’s going to be so excited once he grabs a hold of Metatron’s runes…’ she smiled faintly, looking at Hephaestus discuss something with Poseidon next to him.

The man scratched his long beard, his bronze skin betraying the countless hours he had spent by the forge as a mortal. He could have gotten rid of this feature upon ascending, but he’d clearly chosen not to.

All the gods were dressed in elegant robes, woven by the most talented tailors on Remior, out of expensive silk. Without exception, their clothes had been enchanted by the god of forging himself to weather wind and rain alike.

Well, maybe with one exception.

Her own clothes were the same rags she wore everywhere. She didn’t personally attend these meetings often, leaving Zeus in charge of the Order’s affairs most of the time. Though today was a special occasion – as they had some pretty important things to discuss. The others were getting a little impatient with the boy, so she’d have to give them an explanation. Still, she hadn’t bothered to change

to something more formal. She didn't care about that stuff. And few of the others dared to even glance at her with anything short of utmost respect anyway.

If Percy saw her, he would have recognized her as Clarity. The strange woman he had met in Twilight City. Well, if she allowed him to recognize her, of course. Though, here, she was better known with a different name.

"Femel and Acton's candles have gone out." Hera spoke in a gloomy tone.

Her voice reverberated through the temple, shaking everything besides the gods themselves and their thrones. Her expression was stern as always, her features sharp. Her long dark hair fluttered behind her, betraying her anger – though her calm words didn't. She was strict when training their Green-borns, but everyone knew she cared for them in her own way – flaws and all.

"The little bastard is still inside the Valley as we speak." Zeus added.

The sea of clouds around the mountain rolled and tumbled in response to his will, sparks of lightning jumping up and down his chiselled chest. He turned to her expectantly, as did the other gods.

She remained quiet, however, waiting for them to get it all out first.

"I don't get it!" Hermes yelled. "Lady Phoebe, why won't you let us grab the brat and end this farce already?! He's humiliated us long enough!"

The others didn't say anything, but that spoke volumes in and of itself. Even Phoebe's daughter, Athena, who was always the first to put Hermes in his place when he lost his temper, was silent right now, making her stance on the matter clear.

Phoebe sighed.

"Hermes, perhaps you should start caring more about the future of our world than your own reputation."

The self-centred god only even bothered to weigh in because he'd been the one to make the announcement a few years ago. By now, the mortals were whispering among themselves about the gods' incompetence. And Hermes's name was often one of the first to come up.

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"Lady Phoebe… With all due respect – and I can't believe I'm about to say this – but I agree with Hermes for once. The boy has made a mockery of us a few times too many." Artemis said, Demeter nodding along.

Unlike Hermes, Phoebe didn't blame the two of them for being angry. Percy hadn't just killed a couple of Green-borns. He'd also killed over a dozen members of the Root, some direct descendants of the gods. Specifically, the two goddesses in question had both lost sons to him. Of course, Phoebe knew they didn't care about their children that much. It was mostly the implied insult to their person that bothered them.

"Mother, at the very least, please let us interrogate him and get the recipe of the Aurora Dew. Even if you wish to pardon him for his crimes, there's no reason to delay our world's advancement. We've lost years already – we could have embarked on the long journey toward becoming a greater spring." Athena said, speaking as eloquently as she always did.

Phoebe shook her head.

Next, she took out a small object from her internal world. It was a pinkie-sized vial pinched between her thumb and index finger, a turquoise liquid swirling inside it. It glistened under the bright sunlight, demanding awe from all who looked at it. The other gods were sitting dozens of metres away, but that was a trivial distance for such entities. Their eyes widened as they realized what the object represented.

"I brewed it myself. I learned the recipe just after he escaped from the Fungal Spire, years ago. I only had to watch him once too. You'll be surprised by how simple the trick behind it is."

She chuckled, before continuing.

“Hundreds of greater springs standing at the top of the universe, lording over smaller worlds like ours… all of their strength built upon such a tiny little secret… But I suppose it’s our fault we lacked the ingenuity to figure it out sooner.”

Zeus frowned.

“Lady Phoebe… I’m still confused. If you’ve had the recipe all this time, why didn’t you spread it? To the Order, at least? We could have saved our Green-borns several years off their next advancement.”

“Because I doubt the Holy Children will all manage to keep their mouths shut. We have thousands of Green-borns. One of them is bound to blabber to the low-borns at some point, and all of Remior will find out we have the recipe.

“So what?” Poseidon asked. “Who cares about their opinions?”

“I don’t want Percy to find out his secrets have leaked this soon. I like the pressure he’s under. It’s good for him.” Phoebe explained.

“Two dead Green-borns! And a decade of wasted time from the rest of them!” Hermes exploded in rage. “All to motivate a single piece of Red-born trash?! To work a little harder?! Have you lost your mind, Phoebe?!”

Clearly unable to take the insults aimed at her mother any longer, Athena allowed her internal world to partially unfold, sending a powerful blast of pure force at the eccentric god. Whether or not she agreed with Phoebe today, it appeared there was a limit to the amount of disrespect she would tolerate.

Zeus and Poseidon had to jump in, the latter blocking the attack, mindful to not let the temple shatter to dust. Meanwhile, the former approached his subordinate, placing his hand on the god’s shoulder.

“Hermes… Irrespective of your opinion – which many of us may well share – I would advise you to be mindful of whom you are speaking to.”

The god swallowed hard, nodding grimly.

Phoebe shrugged, not bothered by any of this in the slightest.

“If you’re done throwing a tantrum, sit back and listen. Not that I need to explain myself to any of you – but I’m getting sick of all your pestering.”

She took more objects out of her storage again. Twelve stone tablets, the same words carved on each one. She tossed a copy to each of the other gods. Over the next few seconds, they read the information, their expressions shifting from curiosity and confusion to shock by the end.

What she’d written down was naturally a list of Percy’s achievements, each accompanied by a small description. Specifically, she’d included the things they could spread around to improve their world.

The recipe of the Aurora Dew… His boosting art… The Vault’s magiscript… The new alchemic principles… And of course, the Moirais’ Decree and his ability to share it with others – albeit only one person at a time.

Phoebe had left out some personal details about stuff he couldn’t easily pass on, or those he would downright refuse to share no matter what, such as his familiar, his mutated eyes, his spectral trait or the Ring of Sacrilege. But she had included a short explanation about how he had achieved all this through his bloodline.

By the time they were done, most of their expressions had shifted to genuine interest. Hera, Hermes, Artemis and Demeter were clearly not as thrilled as the others, their personal opinion of Percy still clouding their judgement. But the rest were different. Hephaestus, in particular, was downright ecstatic, a child-like grin plastered all over his face.

‘Well, everyone will come around sooner or later… Once they calm down… They aren’t stupid…’