Wanderer 411

Chapter 411 – Duwa

The Decree – assuming that the natives' strange ability truly was one – hadn't appeared in Percy's Status yet, but that was in line with his expectations. His host's fire affinity wasn't anything special either, nor did the boy seem to possess anything else of note.

Percy would consider fixing the child's second core if the situation called for it. Having learned from his blunder on Melodia, he had cultivated a ton of green mushrooms inside the Valley, carrying enough for a single person.

That didn't mean he was running a charity, however.

His seals had a limited capacity – especially in their thrice-divided state – and he couldn't replenish the ingredients as easily without access to an endless army of Green and Yellow beasts. He was more than happy to help an orphaned Red-born like Enki, or somebody fighting for their life like Micky, Gabe or Sol, but he didn't think his current host fell into either category. As a Green-born, he was unlikely to need more power, and even if he did, his people might be willing to get him the life mana.

'For now, let's just see what I'm dealing with…'

Feeling his surroundings, Percy quickly realized he was lying face-down, the ground covered in barbed plants. The traumatic memories of the demonic jungle flashed through his mind, causing him to inhale sharply.

Opening his eyes, he exhaled in relief upon seeing that the mundane flora didn't resemble the insidious vines that had ravaged Torui village in the slightest. It was just regular-looking bushes – dry and full of tiny thorns. They prickled every inch of exposed skin, stabbing at his host's palms, forearms, feet… and even his face.

'Damn, these things look really sharp. Had the boy been human, his body would have been torn to shreds already.'

Luckily, Duwa's skin was too hard for the thorns to pierce through. It appeared the hostile planet wasn't done harassing them just yet, however. Pushing himself up, Percy felt the plants give way under him, crumbling more easily than he would have expected. The kid was too heavy. Was he wearing enchanted clothes or something?

Percy frowned.

'No, it's not just the fabric. It's everything…'

Walking a couple of steps, Percy carved a pair of narrow lines through the bushes, their brittle branches snapping against his knees. His body must've weighed as much as a carriage. Picking a broken stem from the ground, he played with it for a few seconds, noting that it was heavier than a bucket of water. Dropping it, he saw it land way faster than it was supposed to.

'Is it the gravity here? It's several times stronger than Remior's!'

Many of the planets Percy visited varied in that regard, but the difference was rarely worth mentioning. It seemed to be a pattern – worlds harbouring life often shared similar properties. Or rather, it was probably the opposite – life required certain conditions to prosper.

Well, this place was clearly an outlier.

Percy could still move around with ease, of course. Anything else would have been strange, given his host's grade. But he couldn't help but wonder how their Red-borns survived.

'I guess their bodies are just built different from ours.'

Much like the Atlanteans could endure the crushing pressure of their abyssal kingdom, Duwa's people had clearly evolved to handle the immense gravity of their planet, irrespective of grade.

Eager to confirm his guess, Percy examined his host's hand, even pinching the dark brown skin at a couple of spots. Really strange. At first, he thought the kid's body was made of stone, but that wasn't quite right. It was flesh – just thicker and harder than he was used to. It consisted of several rough flakes

too wide to be described as “scales”, but too small to be called “plates”, joined together in irregular patterns. They resembled a cracked patch of dirt that hadn’t drunk a drop of water in years. Even the tiniest movement made all sorts of grating sounds that the boy seemed completely unbothered by.

Duwa was injured lightly here and there, some caked blood that looked no different from a human’s marring his forearms and lower legs, a series of tiny scabs lining his knuckles.

‘Mister?’ a youthful voice reverberated through Percy’s mind, accompanied by a wave of exhaustion rippling through his soul. ‘Thank you for saving my life, but are you planning to stand here all day, staring at my hands?’

Percy chuckled upon being reminded that he wasn’t alone.

‘What’s the story, kid? How did you end up dying?’ he asked, though he didn’t stop examining himself, or his surroundings.

The boy was wearing a set of yellow training robes – at least that was what Percy assumed they were. The fabric felt as thick and hard as his host’s skin, though it wasn’t in great condition either – it was full of holes and loose strings. Percy couldn’t help but wonder how his host’s clothes had ended up in that state, as he didn’t think the thorned plants he had woken up on could have sliced through them.

The tattered leggings hung about halfway down Duwa’s shins, the sleeves not quite reaching his elbows. The right panel of his tunic was pressed over the left by a green belt wider than the boy’s fist. The ground wasn’t flat. Percy was standing on a sloped surface, the brownish-yellow plants stretching as far as the eye could see, their thorns’ tips glinting under the gentle sunlight. Percy struggled to see past the peak of the hill he was on, but he spotted countless similar hills of various heights in the distance behind him.

Two suns glared at him ominously, like a pair of crimson eyes. The largest one was already at its apex, the other not far from it. Unsurprisingly, it was rather hot, though the sky was quite dark for the time of day it was. It appeared the local stars radiated more heat than light.

‘I guess I pushed myself too hard,’ the boy replied, oblivious to Percy’s thoughts. Next, he rubbed his head in embarrassment, Percy not feeling a single hair on his host’s rough scalp. ‘But it’s not like I can

help it. I've already delayed my advancement by nearly seven seasons. It's a disgrace to my people… I won't be able to face my father until I earn Obatala's Approval.'

Duwa's words were somewhat vague, but they still corroborated many of Percy's earlier guesses.

'Is it too late to do that after you reach Blue?' he asked, seeking confirmation.

The boy nodded.

'It's not just "too late". It's against the law to advance without it – and for good reason. How dare we mortals waste a titan's efforts out of laziness?'

'A bit harsh, isn't it?' Percy asked, raising an eyebrow.

The sentiment, he could get behind. Every Decree was a priceless commodity. If this one had to be obtained at Green, then it was clearly in these people's best interest to make damn sure they earned it at Green. Had Percy been in their shoes, he wouldn't have wanted to advance without it either.

Still, forcing them to do it was a bit much. What if somebody simply lacked the talent to meet whatever the Decree's requirements were? Were they supposed to spend their whole life stuck at the same grade? Even if they neared the end of their lifespan?

Duwa shook his head.

'It's only fair. Throughout our history, the number of fools who have complained about this arrangement could be counted on the fingers of one hand…'

Hearing that, Percy instinctively glanced at his host's hand again, counting his digits. Only four. But the boy continued.

'After all, only Orange-borns or higher live long enough to reach Green or Blue in the first place. Advancing without the Approval would not only amount to spitting in Obatala's face, but also tossing

our heaven-given grades in the garbage. It would be disrespectful toward our Red-born brethren who don't even have the option. Millions of them would have sacrificed anything for the same opportunities that the rest of us have. And that is doubly true for a Green-born like me.'

Percy nodded, appreciating the boy's sincerity and sense of duty. Though he did feel like pushing back against the narrative a little.

'It's even harder for you though, isn't it?' he asked. 'You're just a kid. You've only had your core for a few years, yet they expect you to accomplish something that even adults several times your age routinely struggle with.'

Duwa quietly listened to Percy, not disputing anything he said. Only when he was done did the boy clench his fists, a spark of pride setting his soul ablaze.

'Indeed. But that is my responsibility as a Favoured One of Gallimus. I was born with more than most, so I have to give just as much in return. To be the shield that protects our people from harm. And to aspire for Obatala's heights. To stand shoulder to shoulder with the titan one day, and thank him for His grace, with my chin held high.'

Percy whistled in amusement. The kid was pretty hardcore, but he didn't dislike it. He couldn't help but compare Duwa to the Green-borns at home. His current host had more honour and virtue in his pinkie than that entitled bastard, Acton, had had in his entire body.

On Remior, the Holy Children were pampered, perpetually guarded by a large group of henchmen, and even allowed to commit atrocities with impunity. They spent their whole lives thinking the planet belonged to them, expecting everyone else to treat them like royalty.

Meanwhile, it seemed that the "Favoured Ones" on Gallimus showed kindness to their weaker brethren, putting their gifts in service of their society. No. It wasn't just the Green-borns who acted like this. Based on Duwa's words, everyone treated even their Red-borns with dignity.

Percy sighed, wondering for a second what it would have been like to grow up here.

But he shook the pointless thoughts out of his head. The time when he used to lament his lower birth-grade was something he had already left behind. His bloodline was a hundred times more valuable than a Green core. Even if it wasn't, Percy would make it so.

'I'll be honest with you, Duwa… Obatala's Approval is the reason I came to this place. I didn't know what it was called at the time, but I might have not even looked for somebody to possess if it hadn't been for it. I hope you can let me stay with you until you earn it,' he said, having no intention of deceiving the child.

'I understand. You are free to remain here until I complete my training,' the boy replied, not hesitating for even a moment.

'Are you sure you're okay with giving an outsider access to something so valuable? I don't even know what impact my presence will have on you. For all we know, we might both fail to get it in the end. I'm not going to hold the fact that I saved your life against you.'

Duwa insisted, however.

'Obatala has taught us to be grateful to our benefactors. If I were to selfishly push you away, I wouldn't deserve his Approval.'

Percy chuckled.

'Something tells me that your titan wasn't thinking of outsiders when he made that rule up. Aren't you worried about leaking the ability to other races? You should be more careful about trusting strangers.'

The boy shook his head.

'I haven't agreed to your request lightly. Even knowing the risks, I stand by my decision. Should you choose to betray my trust one day, it will simply be my responsibility to rectify my mistake. Perhaps, you're the one who should think twice before stabbing a Green-born in the back.'

The corner of Percy's lips curled upwards as he found himself on the receiving end of the thinly veiled threat for a change. So amused was he by the child's courage and honesty, that he didn't feel like telling Duwa about the Green-borns he'd already killed.

In any case, he'd already passed the Moirais' Decree to the child – which was already compensation enough for the arguably lesser Decree he would be receiving in return. If the boy ended up missing out on Obatala's Approval because of him, he'd just give him the mushrooms too.

'Good. Then I look forward to your success.'

Chapter 412 – Centipedes

As soon as they reached an agreement, Duwa started moving.

It didn't take Percy long to understand how the child had ended up brushing with death. The environment on Gallimus was quite harsh. The scorching heat and the crushing gravity were already difficult to endure, but that was merely the beginning.

Each individual bush didn't offer much resistance, but trudging through hundreds of them slowly chipped away at his host's stamina. Whenever the loose ground under their feet gave way, sending them tumbling down the hills, the brittle plants failed to cushion their fall in the slightest. The awkward landings didn't hurt too badly, but each blunder set them back by several minutes, often forcing them to climb a hill twice or thrice.

As a native – and a Green – Duwa was probably better equipped to handle the arduous journey than most, but every little thing still sapped away some of his strength, building up his frustration and his fatigue.

'It's reckless to ask so much of a child…' Percy thought, but kept that to himself.

He understood why they did it, of course. While he didn't doubt that many of their Green-borns died during the harsh training, the few that made it to the higher grades were probably much more likely to attain godhood. Percy wouldn't be surprised if they made for stronger – and nobler – deities too.

But he did struggle to understand how their parents were okay with this. Duwa wasn't an orphan – he had a father waiting for him at home – yet the man had clearly sent the child to his doom, and with no supervision to boot.

In any case, Percy remained mostly silent during the first day, not wanting to bother the already-tired boy too much. It wasn't until Duwa took the initiative to speak that Percy realized his host could probably use the distraction, to pry his mind off the hardships he had to endure. During their second day together, they talked about a wide variety of topics, giving Percy the opportunity to learn a lot more about Gallimus and its people.

Days were longer than nights here, largely thanks to the presence of multiple suns. This wasn't his first visit on a planet like this, but the two stars were spaced farther apart than the ones on Felmara, stretching the days and eating into the nights some more. That said, the day-night cycle as a whole wasn't any longer than the one on Remior, which made it easier for Percy to compare the two worlds. At least, that was the case for now – a strange distinction to make, but an important one, considering everything else the boy had shared.

Gallimus always required the same amount of time to orbit the twin stars, but everything else was fluid – from the number of days in a year, to their durations, and even the way they were grouped together. The Gallimians didn't use weeks or months, opting to bundle their days directly into seasons. They did have warmer and colder seasons like Remior, but it was a lot more complicated than that.

Apparently, their solar system contained dozens of planets, many of the larger ones orbiting near Gallimus. So close were they, in fact, that some of them were visible at night. Whenever Gallimus passed by them, their gravity tugged at the planet's surface, inflicting all manners of strangeness on Duwa's world.

Gallimus's rotation was often affected, stretching or shrinking days and nights in various ways. This also gave rise to devastating waves, mountain-splitting earthquakes, and calamitous hurricanes, that often resulted in countless casualties and massive changes to the very geography of the planet. Even the gravity wasn't spared, fluctuating during the course of each day, increasing or decreasing depending on whether the heavenly body in question was above or below the Gallimians' heads.

According to Duwa, the current year was divided into seventeen seasons, further split into a total of six hundred and eighty-three days. Ten of these seasons had elapsed since the Green-born set out on his quest. He had been travelling for over four hundred days, though he had only delayed his advancement by about three hundred – close to a year on Remior. It was ultimately just a drop in the bucket given his

grade, but still a long time for the equivalent of an eleven-year old boy, bracing the wilderness by himself.

Percy also confirmed that this place was indeed a lesser – not a greater – spring. They had elixirs about as effective as the ones on Remior, having relatively developed branches of alchemy and runecrafting. Sadly, Duwa wasn't well-versed in either field, so Percy didn't know if they had discovered any alchemic principles he could master.

He sighed.

'It might be nice to visit this place again in the future, but the priority is getting the Decree.'

At the end of the day, alchemic principles were easier to learn – or even invent – while Decrees were both rarer and infinitely more valuable.

Obatala wasn't Gallimus's only titan, nor even their first one. He was, however, the only one whose Decree affected the general population in such a direct manner, which was why Duwa's people regarded him so highly.

Gallimus wasn't isolated from the rest of the cosmos like Amenthes, but they didn't have particularly strong ties to any other world like Atlantis or Felmara either. Based on what Percy had been able to gather, Duwa's people were strong enough to defend themselves should any other lesser spring invade, but didn't possess anything valuable enough to entice any of their stronger rivals to take their chances.

This meant that Gallimus was relatively peaceful – which was great news, because they already had their hands full with internal matters. Dealing with the catastrophic whims of their planet's orbit was a challenge in and of itself. In fact, Percy was convinced that this was the main reason Duwa's people seemed so united and kind toward one another.

One thing that Percy hadn't asked about just yet, were the details of his host's training. Curious as he was, he had tiptoed around the topic, not wanting to remind the poor kid of his rumbling stomach or his dwindling stamina. He wasn't in a rush anyway. After all, he'd only been here for a couple of days, while Duwa had been working on this for over a year. He didn't think they would be meeting the requirements anytime soon, so he'd tried to figure them out by himself.

It wasn't until their third day together that he finally decided to be direct and ask his host about their purpose. The boy had been travelling in seemingly random directions and hadn't made any attempts to procure more food before they starved to death. They hadn't covered that much ground, as the constant climbing and rolling down the hills had slowed them down massively. Their surroundings hadn't changed all that much either – they'd been traversing the same bumpy sheet of dried bushes throughout.

Just when Percy was contemplating the best way to breach the topic, Duwa paused, picking something from the ground. It was a tiny bug, crawling on a broken branch by the boy's feet. Pinched between the child's fingers, the centipede-like creature squirmed, trying to break free. Percy barely got a chance to examine it – it was no longer than his host's thumb, encased in a glossy, black carapace – when the kid tossed the unfortunate insect into his mouth, chewing through the hard chitin loudly.

Percy was just as creeped out by the act itself, as he was taken aback by its suddenness. Still, he didn't complain, feeling about as famished as his host by now. Sadly for them both, there was barely any meat on the small animal, scarce, salty morsels of flesh lost under the tasteless gravel of the fragmented exoskeleton.

'There should be more of them nearby,' the boy said, consoling himself more than his guest.

Not wasting time, Duwa had already leaned forward, searching through the bushes for another snack.

'Or, you know… we could just eat some of the food from my spatial seal…' Percy suggested – and not for the first time.

He didn't have that much on him, since most of his space was taken by the green mushrooms, but he'd definitely brought enough to last them a few weeks if they used it sparingly. If only his stubborn host hadn't refused his offer whenever he'd brought it up…

The boy insisted that accepting external help would go against the spirit of the trial. Percy had been tempted to point out that, technically, Duwa had already died – and would have stayed dead – if not for his "external help". In the end, he chose to keep his mouth shut, however, realizing the kid was crazy enough to potentially kill himself out of shame if he said anything.

To Duwa's great joy – and Percy's mild contentment – they found a second centipede a few minutes later, and a third one not long after. Stuffing his face full of the modest snacks, the boy seemed to enjoy his first meal in days a lot more than Percy did. Only when he had his fill did he take off again, heading straight toward what Percy assumed was the source of the creatures.

'Duwa, mind telling me what we're trying to accomplish here? You've been travelling at random, without much of a plan. I doubt you're going anywhere specific, so am I right to assume this is some kind of hunting trip? Are we looking for a particular beast to kill?'

'Not exactly. Though fighting against beasts is one of the best ways to make progress. That's why I'm currently looking for the stronger centipedes,' Duwa said. 'Look, I'll explain everything later. It'll make more sense after you watch me fight.'

Percy nodded, guessing that the beasts were just a means to an end – they probably amounted to little more than practice dummies to help his host perfect some kind of obscure spell or technique. Though, that didn't really explain why the kid had to spend a year roaming in the wild. Couldn't his people just bring him some opponents to fight?

By the time the first of the two suns set, Duwa located some higher-graded centipedes. The Red ones were as thin and flat as his palm, though only half as wide. They were long enough to reach from the tips of his fingers all the way to his elbow.

Meanwhile, the Orange ones had a similar shape, but they were longer than Duwa was tall. Their smooth shells looked very different from those of the mundane variants they had eaten earlier, however. Shimmering in a pale light, they appeared to be made of diamonds more than chitin, making Percy shudder at the mere thought of munching on them. At the same time, they possessed even more limbs than their weaker kin, their countless needle-like legs rhythmically stabbing through dirt and rock as the bugs sped toward the Green-born.

Duwa evaded the charging creatures with ease, pinning them and crushing them under the balls of his feet with some well-executed stomps, whittling their numbers down rapidly. Thankfully, he didn't try to eat any of them this time, probably realizing he'd only be cracking his teeth on their shells.

Percy and his host advanced even more slowly than before, the centipedes growing stronger and more numerous with every hill they traversed. It wasn't until both crimson suns emerged from the horizon once again that they finally stumbled upon what Percy assumed were their targets.

They had to be, given the boy's elation at the sight.

Duwa took on a fighting stance, as he glared at the three Yellow centipedes, as wide as the boy himself, but over twice as long as the child was tall. The creatures noticed them too.

They surrounded the kid, cautiously closing in as their crooked mandibles clicked and clacked repeatedly, their sharp tips dripping with venom.

Chapter 413 – Brawl

Initially, the sight of their opponents hadn't left Percy particularly impressed.

A Green mage – any Green mage, even a young and inexperienced one – would have made quick work of a bunch of Yellow beasts. Thus, he hadn't thought the ensuing battle would have posed much of a threat to his host's survival. Percy had simply assumed the boy had spent this long searching for the perfect sparring partners – just strong enough that they wouldn't die from the very first blow, but weak enough that Duwa could disregard them with impunity.

Well, he couldn't have been more wrong.

As soon as the first of the three centipedes lunged at the boy, Percy realized that his host had no intention of unleashing his magic on the creatures. Side-stepping the blow, he barely avoided the pincer-like mandibles of the oversized bug, letting it cleave a wide path through the undergrowth. Yet, the Green-born didn't get a chance to catch his breath, as the other two creatures were already upon him.

Dodging attack after attack, the child looked for an opening of his own. By the time the third centipede's lunge had missed, the first one had already recovered, beginning the cycle anew.

The boy did an admirable job avoiding the deadly stabs of the creatures. He even put a lot of effort into stepping around the puddles of venom they left in their wake, the acidic substance making sizzling sounds as it burned the dry plants.

Finding an opportunity to land his own blows proved hard. Duwa handled his body better than most mages on Remior did, but he wasn't nearly as skilled in close combat as somebody like Percy or Micky either.

It wasn't until a couple minutes later that he managed to slam his fist onto one of their carapaces. The serpentine monster merely bent to absorb the blow, however, before snapping back in place, deflecting the boy's clumsy punch without as much as a scratch or dent on its shell. The only thing that Duwa had achieved, had been to tear the scabs off his knuckles, leaving a bloody imprint on the beast's smooth exoskeleton.

'Why isn't he using his magic?' Percy wondered, though he kept the thoughts to himself, knowing it wasn't his place to question Duwa's approach, nor to distract the boy during the fight.

The Green-born would have won already, had he unleashed his spells against the creatures. Even if the scorching flames had failed to melt right through their glossy shells, they would have certainly cooked the soft flesh lingering within. Let alone three Yellow centipedes, Duwa should have been capable of fighting five if he hadn't handicapped himself.

The problem was that the child would be hard-pressed to achieve the same level of success with his bare hands. A sapient's power was mostly concentrated in their core. Sure, each advancement empowered one's body and sublimated their mind and soul, but the improvements couldn't compare with those that beasts experienced during their evolutions. Fuelled entirely by their peculiar affinity, the bodies of magical creatures were essentially no different from spells themselves, after all.

Even with a higher grade, Duwa was at a severe disadvantage fighting like this. It certainly didn't help that he still had the body of a child, and that his opponents' exoskeletons were harder than those of other creatures at their level.

'Is he not allowed to use magic? In any form?'

Percy couldn't help but think back to the past few days. He had never once seen Duwa release a single spark of fire mana from his core. At the time, he'd assumed that the Green-born hadn't deemed it necessary, since he'd been able to deal with the weaker critters just fine.

In hindsight, it seemed to go much deeper than that.

Was that why they'd eaten everything raw? Percy had chalked that up to some cultural preference or, perhaps, to his host not knowing how to cook. The boy didn't even carry a spatial storage device with him. It would have made everything so much simpler, and Gallimus definitely looked advanced enough to have those. And if they did, they should have equipped their Green-borns with them, before anyone else.

If Percy's conclusion was correct, it would explain so much.

Then again, Duwa had already cheated somewhat, by allowing Percy to bring him back to life. Soul Stitching was magic after all, as was the Insomnia trait that had eliminated the boy's need for sleep.

'Actually, is that why he didn't seem all that excited when I offered to save him? Or when I told him about the trait?'

As stubborn and fixated on his people's ways as Duwa was, it appeared he was still flexible enough to compromise when necessary. There wasn't a point to sticking to the rules if he was dead, after all. At the same time, he clearly intended not to indulge more than he had to.

Thinking that his guess was spot on, Percy shifted his attention back to the fight. He wanted to see how the boy intended to get out of the mess. And why he'd chosen to get into it in the first place. Over the next hour or so, the child continued to avoid the deadly lunges of his harrowing opponents, finding more chances to land his own blows. While his body was a fair bit weaker than the creatures', the superior reflexes afforded to him by his higher grade still saved his life countless times.

By now, the hard shells were more red than white, as Duwa's desperate punches had done little more than slowly smearing them in blood. Percy was a little surprised that the boy hadn't changed tactics yet, as it didn't look like he would be penetrating the centipedes' defences anytime this century.

'Maybe that's not what he's trying to do…'

Percy could have offered a hand, of course, but he understood his host would have probably rejected his help. Instead, he racked his brain to decipher the child's intentions. To see how the brawl was related to Obatala's Approval, and the year-long trial to earn it. Eventually, he noticed something strange

happening inside the boy's core. It was subtle – which was why he hadn't felt this earlier – but it seemed to repeat at certain moments.

Observing his host carefully, Percy tried to figure out the pattern.

Two centipedes closed into Duwa from either side. He leapt back to avoid them. Failing to find purchase, he tripped, sliding down the steep slope with the three creatures right behind him. The child didn't slow down until he neared the foot of the hill, at which point he managed to push himself up just in time to dodge another deadly blow aimed at his neck.

'Nothing.'

Throughout the – arguably perilous – exchange, the Green-born's core had remained still as a lake. It wasn't until Duwa moved to attack again that its contents trembled once more. Right when his fist was about to connect, some mana tried to ooze out of the organ, to spill into the channels leading to the boy's hand. But Duwa didn't let it, ultimately keeping the mana firmly contained within his sternum.

'It's not whenever he moves. Only when he tries to attack. But what is it? Indecision?'

Had the kid simply grown tired of the exhausting battle? Of the impossible trial the titan had imposed on him? Was he considering violating the rules once more, to end the centipedes swiftly with a fireball?

Having spent a lot of time talking to the boy, Percy somehow doubted that was it. But if it wasn't, it meant there had to be a deeper purpose behind the child's actions – something directly related to Duwa's goal. Watching the fight some more, he soon came up with another guess.

'Maybe it's not the mana that he's trying to extract from his core. He's not allowed magic, so mana is just a nuance. Is he trying to separate his willpower from it?'

It certainly looked like Duwa was trying to pull something out of his core, and mana just got in the way by sticking to it. Since the Decree had something to do with domains, it wasn't all that surprising that the requirement would be related to them in some way.

Then again, manipulating willpower on its own was precisely what a domain was. This was something only Blues should be capable of. Didn't Duwa need to earn the Approval first, before he could do this?

The fight continued until well past noon. The boy was panting heavily by then. Luckily, his opponents had also grown tired, their black, compound eyes glaring at Duwa with caution. They had halted their offensive at some point, no longer in a rush to attack.

Sighing, the child turned away, finally deciding to call this a draw. The centipedes didn't chase either, seemingly agreeing that they weren't getting anywhere.

'Care to explain what that was all about? What were you doing with your mana back there?' Percy asked.

Duwa didn't reply immediately. Putting some distance from the Yellow beasts, he reached the outskirts of their territory, picking a few of the mundane variants up from the bushes to munch on. At least, the Red and Orange bugs hadn't dared to bother him. Not after watching him spend the whole day sparring with their leaders. Only once the child had caught his breath did he respond.

'What else? I'm trying to awaken my domain.'

Chapter 414 – Gate

Percy was more confused than ever.

His initial understanding of Gallimus was that their Greens had to complete some task to be given their titan's Decree. That would grant them a domain – or a weaker version of one – ahead of time. It wouldn't necessarily be very useful before their advancement, but it would turn them into stronger Blues down the line.

According to Duwa, this wasn't quite right, however.

Not only were their Greens somehow capable of awakening their domain without the Decree, this was exactly the requirement for obtaining Obatala's Approval. Leaving aside the difficulty of the trial, that only begged another question – what did the Decree actually do?

Noticing his inner turmoil, the boy sighed.

‘I don’t understand this stuff that much better than you, so I’ll just repeat my father’s explanation. Long story short, domains are highly personal. Gods and titans might be able to give us things like blessings or bloodlines, but nobody can grant us a domain. That’s something we have to produce by ourselves.’

‘So, is this not exclusive to Gallimus? Are you saying that every Green in the universe can awaken their domain with enough effort?’

Duwa nodded.

‘Yes, but it wouldn’t be very useful for most of them. That’s where Obatala’s Approval comes into play. It can’t give you a domain, but it can lock your domain in its strongest state. That’s typically the only way for a Green to retain and enhance it during their advancement.’

‘I’m not sure I’m following…’ Percy replied, scratching his head.

He wasn’t a complete stranger to domains. One of his other clones had already manifested one in Elaine’s body, so Percy had had a chance to play with it extensively. He didn’t have the corresponding memories, since his cousin’s clone had yet to return by the time this one had left for Gallimus.

Still, the two sides had communicated a lot over the last couple of months, so Percy understood the elusive ability much better than he had in the past. Nothing he had experienced would suggest that a domain’s strength fluctuated and had to be “locked in its strongest state”.

His host scanned their surroundings, his gaze eventually settling on a rocky protrusion in the distance. Slowly making his way toward it, Duwa remained silent for a few minutes, seemingly gathering his thoughts. Only when he took a seat on the boulder did the child resume his explanation.

‘You can think of a domain as a large, metallic gate that wants to remain shut. In this analogy, a Blue would be like a burly adult. They are more than strong enough to open the gate with ease, and to keep it open for as long as they want, without worrying that it’ll slam in their face.’

‘What about a Green then?’ Percy asked.

Duwa shrugged.

‘They’re like a toddler. The gate wasn’t built for them in the first place, so it would be exceedingly difficult for them to pry it open for even a moment. But not impossible. What if the toddler keeps ramming into the gate over and over again, using every muscle in their body? Perhaps, they’ll get lucky after ten attempts. Or a hundred. Or a thousand. With enough patience and persistence, the gate will budge.’

Percy nodded, picturing the example vividly.

‘Is there a point to doing that though?’

‘Normally, no,’ Duwa conceded. ‘First of all, it’s highly unreliable. Nobody in their right mind would try to use this in a fight. Your opponent won’t let you try your moves a thousand times on them. Even if it was more consistent than that, a Green’s domain is laughably weak. Going back to the analogy, the opening wouldn’t be wide enough to even let the toddler through. They’re better off relying on their mana instead...’

‘But that’s not the point. You just want the gate to be open at the moment of your promotion,’ Percy realized.

‘Exactly. Ultimately, you can think of Obatala’s Approval as a wedge. The effort to open the gate for the first time has to come from the toddler. But once they get there, the titan’s magic keeps the gate from closing. It still won’t make the opening any wider, but it guarantees the toddler will… have to put less effort when they grow up? Allowing them to… open a bigger gate? Okay, I guess that’s where the analogy falls apart. But you get what I mean.’

‘Yeah…’ Percy muttered.

Tearing a small branch off the nearest bush, he played with it in his hand, snapping its thorns one by one with his thumb as his mind raced with ideas. The boy didn’t disturb him either.

‘Domains are powerful, but they’re also so much more than just weapons for Blues and Violets to wield…’

According to Nephthys and Zoris, domains were one of the cornerstones of a deity’s internal world – along with their cores. Percy could hardly imagine what an empowered domain might mean for his eventual ascension to godhood. Of course, he had yet to even earn the Decree, and he was over a century away from Green – let alone Blue or divinity. Still, daydreaming never hurt anyone, and foundations had to be laid early…

His host’s explanation had raised even more questions, however. If a Green could tap into their domain a full grade ahead of time, how would other things like second cores or boosting arts enter into the equation? Would they make it easier to unlock the ability?

Elaine’s domain had clearly been affected by both Circulation and her second Green core. Even though she hadn’t tried to awaken it before Blue, she had still been powerful enough to hold four Blues back not long after her promotion.

What about Nesha or Micky who had not only a Green core like Duwa, but also a Yellow core in their abdomen, and multiple instances of Circulation? They should be even closer to their domain than Percy’s current host, shouldn’t they? The only reason they hadn’t tapped into it was because they hadn’t even known it was possible. What if their second cores reached Green too? What if they upgraded their boosting arts into the Dance?

Percy was probably farther behind than his companions. Even though he was arguably stronger than either of them, he had surpassed them with skill and the sheer quantity of his mana, not its quality. His actual grade was twice removed from Blues, so he was willing to bet that he wouldn’t even qualify as a toddler in Duwa’s analogy.

But what if he did?

Could he enhance his domain twice more? First at Green, and then at Blue again? Or maybe four times in total – with each of his core’s individual advancements? And would he be able to help his companions grow stronger too, through his clones?

It probably wouldn't be that good. Even if he could cheat like this, he was bound to run into diminishing returns fairly quickly. But even a single boost had made a noticeable difference to the Gallimians' souls – enough for Percy to tell from afar.

Regardless, all of this would need to be thoroughly tested.

'Well, let's get the Decree first, before worrying about any of that. I'll have a lifetime to explore its effects, assuming I can bring it back to Remior…'

Percy shifted his attention back to the boy, who had courteously waited for him to finish thinking about the subject.

'So how are you meant to do this?'

'It's ultimately just a question of effort and consistency, but my people have discovered a few tricks that help.'

'Such as?'

'Enduring hardship – in all its forms – is the fastest way to hone our wills. Ironically, it's the one thing that we have in spades thanks to our planet's harsh climate. The gravity… the heat… the hunger… the weather… every little bit brings us a step closer to awakening our domains. The impact they have is minimal, but we only need a momentary spike in our willpower to earn the Approval. Perhaps, it isn't an accident that Obatala chose this method to bolster our strength.'

Percy frowned, thinking of something else.

'Is that why you don't carry any supplies or spatial devices with you? To make things even harder?'

'Partly. But there's another reason. We don't use magic, because we need to suppress our instinct to rely on our mana. How can we expect to draw our latent domain out if our first reaction is to hurl fireballs at our problems? At the same time, we've learned that the easiest way for a Green to manifest their willpower is to peel it off their mana.'

‘I’m guessing that’s what you were trying to do against the centipedes?’ Percy asked, getting a nod back.

It wasn’t very surprising. Blues didn’t need to go through so many hoops, as they had a lot more control over their willpower – they could just manifest it directly. Greens, on the other hand, couldn’t even perceive it easily. The simplest way for them to access it, was to extract it from their mana. After all, their cores passively attached their willpower to the substance as they converted the ambient mana to their own.

‘To sum this up, your job is to go around fighting Yellow beasts with your bare hands, enduring countless hardships while trying to separate your willpower from your mana? Until you get lucky enough to manifest a short-lived domain?’

‘Pretty much.’

Percy nodded. Should Duwa succeed, there was a chance he would also receive the Decree, but he didn’t want to leave that up to chance. Or at least, he would rather raise his odds as much as possible. Thanks to his time with his cousin, he knew that two people inhabiting the same body could manifest separate domains. This definitely applied to Blues, but he saw no reason why it wouldn’t apply to Greens too.

‘Starting today, I’ll be working on the challenge alongside you. I’ll try not to interfere with your control over your body, but I’ll be going through the same hardships as you, and working to draw some of my own willpower out of your mana. If we time this correctly, we might be more likely to get two copies of the Approval.’

Chapter 415 – New season

Since that day, Percy worked alongside his host to develop his own domain, though he knew his efforts might ultimately prove unnecessary. Depending on how the Decree got disseminated, he might receive his own free copy regardless. Still, he didn’t want to risk it.

He hadn’t forgotten how close he and Enki had come to missing out on Ea’s Gift. Had the totem in the assessment centre not decided to shower them with a second portion of mind mana, they would have swum away with merely half of the Decree each. And he didn’t know if the mechanism granting Obatala’s Approval would be equally generous with a cheating outsider.

The good news was that he didn't have to worry about Duwa's survival as much. Young as he was, the Green-born wasn't a complete amateur – he'd already spent over a year in the wilderness by himself, and he understood Gallimus's environment way better than Percy did. This gave Percy the chance to focus primarily on the happenings inside their mana core. He had a lot of ground to cover, if he hoped to catch up to the boy.

'He's already made more progress than I thought,' Percy realized a few days later.

Duwa hadn't yet managed to gather enough of his willpower to form even a semblance of a domain, but he had succeeded at extracting some of it from his mana. Percy hadn't been able to tell at first, because he had no way to detect somebody else's willpower directly. Even mapping out his own was somewhat challenging.

He'd only discovered this by accident, while studying the child's methods. Whenever Duwa peeled away some of his willpower from the mana, he left a small gap behind. Percy's willpower then rushed to fill it up, giving him an estimate of how much willpower the boy had extracted. Copying the Green-born's exercises, Percy started tugging and pushing at the mana too, occasionally tearing a short-lived sliver of willpower from the core.

'This isn't as hard as I thought it would be!'

Percy had been afraid that he would never catch up to Duwa in time for it to make a difference. The boy did have quite a head-start on him, after all. Luckily, Percy soon realized that he possessed several major advantages of his own.

To start, his willpower had already been honed to perfection, without having to go through all the hoops that Duwa had been putting himself through. The boy's daily hardships might have been plenty for the average person – let alone a child – but they utterly paled in comparison to what Percy had subjected himself to over the last couple of decades.

Ever since he discovered his bloodline, he had endured agonizing pain on a regular basis – be it during the creation of his clones, through the use of his boosting arts, or whenever he experienced his hosts' – often gruesome – deaths. Beyond just pain, Percy had also spent an arguably unhealthy amount of time training, shared his beast hosts' crushing hunger, and carried a lot of stress and responsibility over his shoulders.

‘Maybe winning the masochist challenge isn’t something I should be happy about…’ he thought, grinning sheepishly as he scratched the back of Duwa’s head. ‘But I can’t argue with the results.’

On top of having essentially graduated from the school of hardship, Percy was better positioned to handle the domain too. He’d experienced several hostile domains over the past few months and even sliced through a bunch of them with his scythes. Furthermore, he’d even received some advice from his counterpart wielding a proper domain of his own while possessing his cousin. None of that could eliminate his current grade gap to a real Blue, but these were things he doubted any other Yellow or Green in the universe had experienced.

That said, developing his nascent domain wasn’t the only thing on his mind.

None of this would matter if the boy ended up dying before they succeeded, and their survival didn’t depend solely on Duwa’s skill or experience. A lot of it came down to luck. The two had found more critters to munch on since the centipedes, so they didn’t have to worry about starving to death just yet, but it did take them about a week to find a source of drinking water.

Duwa would have teared up at the sight of the narrow creek – if only his eyes hadn’t dried out already. And Percy shared the sentiment. Sprinting excitedly towards the serpentine line of azure curving around the hills, splitting the bumpy plain in two, they gulped down as much water as they could fit in their stomach. Had the child been human, he would have definitely died of thirst by now, Green or otherwise. Thankfully, Duwa seemed to require much less water to stay hydrated. The liquid tasted a little different from what Percy was used to – likely thanks to Gallimus’s unique distribution of minerals – but he didn’t care in the slightest, as this wasn’t his first trip to an alien world.

Having barely survived another obstacle threatening their life, Percy took the chance to evaluate his situation and plan for the long term.

‘Based on what Duwa says, he’ll be awakening his domain a few months from now. At my current pace, there’s a good chance I’ll catch up by then.’

Percy had already observed and copied his host’s methods enough to understand how it all worked. Of course, there was always a chance the boy would get lucky and pull it off as early as tomorrow, leaving Percy without the Approval, though there wasn’t much he could do about that. Even if their skill level had been equal, there was no guarantee they would unlock the ability at the same time.

‘Wait, no… I actually do have a way to eliminate this uncertainty…’

Perhaps, Percy would be giving the boy his second core after all. If they both improved enough to approach their goal, they could use the boost from the new organ to instantly lower the difficulty of the challenge, allowing them both to awaken their domains in quick succession. The problem was that the stubborn child would likely consider that cheating.

Thankfully, Percy had an answer for that too.

The second core would only affect the boy once it was filled up with mana for the first time. In theory, Percy could use the mushrooms to repair the Moirais’ Decree, take some time to clear some of his host’s new channels, and stop shy of the last step.

Then, they could wait for Duwa to awaken his domain fairly and squarely. Right when he was about to receive the Approval, Percy would then fill the core up, hopefully giving him the push he needed to complete the challenge too.

There were many things that could go wrong, and the mechanism granting the Decree might not be one they could trick in the first place, but Percy was confident that this was the best possible approach in the face of the unknown.

Now, he just had to convince his host to go through with it. The boy didn’t really have a reason to decline. At the end of the day, a second core was a good thing, as long as it didn’t interfere with Duwa’s morals. Then again, cheating his people’s most respected titan out of a Decree for the sake of an outsider wasn’t exactly the behaviour of an upstanding citizen…

Percy mentally shook his head.

‘Well, Obatala will have to suck it up. Gallimus is getting more than me out of this exchange anyway…’

Overall, Percy was happy with the plan. One thing he wasn’t a fan of, however, was how long this would all take. He figured the boy could easily need half a year to awaken his domain. It would give Percy

plenty of time to bridge the gap, but it also meant he'd be taking up one of his main body's cords for months. None of his clones had ever spent that long away – at least, not from their perspective.

Then again, he had so many more of them now, and each was busy with their own projects. The ones in Elaine or Nesha's bodies might return before he did, bringing back the water version of the Dance or some new advancements in magiscript. Percy had a second clone hopping from planet to planet alongside this one, so he might also discover something new that way. And even if none of that happened, his main body still had several other things to work on.

At least, he didn't think his presence would be urgently required for the infiltration mission, so even in the unlikely scenario that he spent over two years here, the original should be fine.

'Hey, it's a Decree we're talking about. It's definitely worth taking things nice and slow… The others will just have to manage without me for a while.'

Percy was looking forward not only to Obatala's Approval, but also to the numerous breakthroughs he would experience once he fused into his main body. Having so many clones training in parallel was quite exhilarating. It gave him the feeling of progress even when he wasn't doing anything. Percy had essentially turned himself into an entire team of specialists, each of them working tirelessly toward their common goal. And the temporary lapses in memory only made the eventual surprises even more thrilling.

The next couple of weeks passed relatively uneventfully, with both Percy and Duwa making good progress. He even advised his host to stay close to the river this time, to make sure they had access to water and more food as they looked for more beasts to fight. Things had been going well, though that wasn't destined to last. One day, during their break from training, the boy warned Percy about something that he had honestly been expecting.

Gallimus was finally about to enter a new season.

And it was going to be a nasty one…

Chapter 416 – Boreastrum

Up until now, Percy had only experienced a relatively mild season on Gallimus – something akin to spring on Remior. The heat had been rising steadily, but it had remained bearable. Before today, the extreme weather effects his host had warned him about had yet to come into play.

Suffice to say, Percy's shock was palpable when he saw the tide of dust and shattered vines sweeping toward them from the south, a towering cloud rapidly advancing over the hills. His first instinct had been to run, but it didn't take long for him to realize how foolish that would be – they'd never outrun a worldwide disaster. Bracing for impact was their only option.

Even before the raging winds reached them, Percy felt dizzy. It was lucky he wasn't the one in charge of their body, otherwise he would have fallen off balance by now. It was like somebody was pulling them toward a certain direction, trying to topple them. He'd been feeling like this since yesterday, though it hadn't been as much of a problem. Still, the tug had steadily grown stronger, and it was starting to get quite uncomfortable.

'What the hell is going on?' he asked.

His host had warned him things had been about to change, but he hadn't delved into too much detail.

Duwa sighed, shifting their gaze toward the orange-hued heavenly body looming in the northern sky, clearly visible even during the day. It had been growing larger over the past few weeks, until it eventually blocked out one of the two stars entirely. The smallest of the crimson suns hadn't risen today, and Percy suspected it wouldn't do so for a while longer. The prolonged eclipse had already plunged their surroundings into relative darkness and caused the temperature to plummet, giving Percy the impression that the heavens themselves were winking at them mischievously.

'Due to our planet's current tilt, Vagus will be pulling us toward the north throughout the season,' the Green-born explained. 'The sideways component of its gravity is why we're struggling to stay upright – and also the reason for the winds. Just try not to focus too much on your surroundings until you get used to it. I'll handle things for the next few days.'

Percy had more questions, but the violent tide struck before he could voice them. Duwa dropped to all fours just in time to endure the crushing wave of dust, barely keeping contact with the ground. Thankfully, Gallimus's natural gravity was strong enough to anchor the boy in place. Brittle chunks of plant matter rained down, but most of the debris shattered harmlessly against Duwa's tough skin.

Navigating the hill-covered plains would be annoying for the foreseeable future, but the storm seemed like it would be more inconvenient than downright dangerous. Despite the frigid temperature, the difficulty standing and the reduced visibility, Percy guessed that the local wildlife had probably long adapted to the planet's violent whims. Even the nearby creek looked mostly untouched. Water was far heavier on Gallimus, and the storm lacked the strength to lift the liquid over the hills encasing the narrow river.

'Wow. You weren't kidding about the harsh climate…' Percy said once he realized they were safe. 'I can see how a Green like you can handle it with relative ease, but how do your cities – or your Red-borns – survive this stuff?'

The boy shrugged.

'Boreastrum – the current season – is admittedly one of the worst we have to deal with. Lower-graded people are usually advised to stay indoors while it lasts. Luckily, seasons this violent only come around once every three or four years. The rest aren't that bad. As for our cities, we build and enchant them with this in mind. I don't know what our ancestors did before we had a way to advance, but many of our gods and titans help nowadays, working tirelessly to minimize the damage.'

Percy swallowed hard, imagining how even the lofty existences standing at the very peak of Gallimus's hierarchy had their hands full with this. But he didn't say anything, opting to resume his training. Sparring against the beasts would be a lot harder until the weather settled, which would rob them of the best opportunities to practice splitting their willpower from their mana. However, that didn't mean there was nothing they could do.

Percy still had a few channels to clear, the boy having already allowed him to repair his second core. In fact, he had been quite excited to realize that Duwa's new mana network didn't resemble any he had personally possessed, indicating that the boy's second affinity would likely be a rare one.

Getting a feel for the exact mana type hadn't been easy, as it was mostly ambient mana from the outside that he was using to clear the channels. Based on the vague shape of the network, he thought there was a good chance it would be a life affinity.

'This kid is probably the luckiest person I've ever met. Green-born, saved from the brink of death, handed a second core without issue and even my first host to ever get a rare affinity…' He sighed internally. 'But I suppose he deserves that much, given how nice and hard-working he is. It's such a pity my clones don't have my bloodline though.'

While Percy clearly understood how much better his version of the ability was, he'd always wanted to play around with Archibald's version too. Had the petal he'd stolen from House Tantalus contained a life affinity instead of water, there was a good chance Percy would have eaten it himself, even sacrificing his pure affinity for it. Not that he'd ever regretted his decision to keep it, but he would have found it difficult to resist the temptation of, not only a second rare affinity, but also one guaranteed to be compatible with his bloodline.

'Well, whatever… It's good for the boy… For now, let's just focus on getting the new core ready.'

Boreastrum was supposed to last for around four months. The lateral gravity pulling them north kept increasing during the first half, slowly climbing to a point that even Duwa struggled with – at least for a few days. At the same time, the foreign planet had continued to enlarge in their vision, covering more and more of the sky with each passing day. Thankfully, Vagus never quite managed to conceal the second star, or the temperature would have dropped even more steeply, likely causing some serious trouble for the Gallimians.

Over the third and fourth months, the planet looming over their heads gradually shrank again, the horizontal gravity it exerted over Duwa's world weakening in the process. The temperature hadn't recovered yet, however, since Vagus was still blocking the first of the two suns, and would continue to do so until the very end of the season.

The good news was that Percy and Duwa had been able to resume their training way sooner than that.

The storm they had endured at the onset of the new season had only lasted for about a week. According to the Green-born, it had been caused by Vagus's gravity pulling much of Gallimus's atmosphere to the northern hemisphere of the planet, only stopping once the pressure differential reached a tentative balance.

Apparently, the reverse would occur at the end of the season, with a southbound storm returning the accumulated air to the southern hemisphere over the course of another week. That hadn't happened yet, though Percy wouldn't say he was looking forward to it.

In any case, the end of the first storm had returned the visibility to normal, allowing Percy and his host to spar against the Yellow beasts for most of the season. The extreme cold and the lateral gravity had still made everything needlessly irritating, but their targets had to endure the same conditions, levelling

the playing field somewhat. At the end of the day, Gallimus's fickle climate helped more than it hurt, as it offered them with another hurdle to overcome, and thus another opportunity to hone their wills.

'I'm still glad this nonsense will be over in a few days…' Percy told the boy over a meal.

They had both made a ton of progress with their nascent domains, and Percy was confident he had already caught up to the boy. If they were to awaken their second core right now, they'd probably both have the Decree by tomorrow. Sadly, Duwa wouldn't hear it.

Working towards the Approval wasn't the only thing Percy had done, however. He had also hoped to stumble upon some gravity ingredients to bring back to Remior. Perhaps, he'd been silly to think they would be more common on a planet with strong gravity, but he'd still kept his eyes open. Having given all the mushrooms to his host, he had a lot more space in his seal, after all.

His current favourite was a Red plant with dozens of leaves rolled together like the petals of a rose. Curiously, it was a lot lighter than everything else on Gallimus, which filled him with hope that it used gravity mana to fight against the planet's pull.

Of course, even if it ended up possessing the correct affinity, his main body might no longer need it. Percy had been on Gallimus for nearly five months, so there was a good chance his other clones had already beaten him to it. Even if the other clone currently roaming the universe had failed to find a gravity ingredient, the one residing in his girlfriend's body might have purchased one in Twilight City.

Regardless, Percy didn't want to put all his eggs in one basket if he could help it.

Leaving aside his ambitious plans of upgrading his boosting art to induce an artificial advancement, he was looking forward to registering the compression principle. Not only would it render his potions and his tattoos useable again, it might also raise his brewing yield, allowing him to get more Aurora Dew out of his stash of elixirs.

Overall, Percy was more than happy with this trip.

A few days before the end of the season, Percy and Duwa appeared to have reached a critical point. They often found themselves gathering a near-tangible amount of willpower in their hands, the ethereal substance dissipating just half a step short of forming a nascent domain.

Knowing they were both on the verge of completing the trial, Percy stopped training alongside the boy, to give Duwa a chance to obtain the Decree first. If Percy did it before the Green-born, his host would likely refuse to awaken the new core, potentially missing out on the Approval because of his stubbornness.

'Or maybe I'm just being paranoid and we'll both get it regardless, but it's better not to leave it up to chance.'

Over the next couple of days, Percy watched his host spar against one enemy after another, patiently waiting for the boy to take the final step. And sure enough, the Green-born's year-long efforts bore fruit soon enough.

Unfortunately, they did so at a most inconvenient time…

Chapter 417 – Inconvenient time

Duwa hadn't meant to screw Percy over.

He was grateful to his guest, not only for saving his life and granting him a second core, but also for keeping him company all this time. Duwa had tried not to dwell on it too much, but spending so many days alone had nearly driven him mad.

That was why he'd decided to take a break from training upon noticing the towering cloud of dust heading south. The storm marking the end of boreastrum would last for several days, and sparring against the beasts would be exceedingly difficult until the weather settled.

Ideally, Duwa had hoped for both himself and Percy to earn Obatala's Approval. The last thing he'd wanted had been to cheat his guest out of the opportunity. If he completed the trial just as the storm was about to reach them, Percy would have found it much harder to follow suit.

Sadly, that was exactly the position Duwa ended up placing his benefactor in – albeit inadvertently.

He wanted to slap himself for not having had the foresight to move away from the cyots before the storm. The round, Orange-cored beasts he'd been fighting the day before weren't particularly strong on their own, but they were numerous and a terrible match for the harsh weather. Their bodies were just light enough for the violent gales to lift them off the ground and hurl them at Duwa, yet just heavy – and hard-shelled – enough to punch deep craters wherever they landed, leaving the surrounding hills riddled with holes.

The creatures hadn't attacked him out of malice – or even of their own volition. They'd simply curled up to shield themselves from the wind. The storm had done the rest, pelting Duwa's position with deadly projectiles and forcing him to dodge by the skin of his teeth.

He'd done a decent job at first – at least until the accident happened.

Faced with a projectile shooting toward his face, Duwa instinctively raised his fist to block it. He didn't think much of it as he repeated for the umpteenth time the same simple actions that had defined his life for the past year. As luck would have it, his desperation in that moment pushed him just over the edge, allowing him to extract ever-so-slightly more willpower than before – and to fold it into shape just a bit more neatly than all his previous efforts...

Punching the Orange creature out of the way, Duwa stared at his hand in shock, feeling the invisible bubble of raw power already dissipating from around his fist. Any other time, he would've been elated to have finally achieved his goal – but right now, he wished more than anything to take that moment back.

'Percy… I'm so sorry… I didn't mean to do tha–'

Duwa didn't even get a chance to apologize properly for his blunder. Another Orange creature was already upon him, forcing him to sidestep. At the same time, a deep rumble permeated the heavens, somehow penetrating through the cacophony of howling winds and the heavy thuds of the falling beasts.

Casting a fleeting glance upward, he noticed that some of the rapidly drifting clouds were resisting the storm, forming a tiny island of relative calm above his head. The nebulous mass churned and rolled, gathering strength for something big. It was hard to make the details out through the screen of dust, but sporadic flashes of lightning illuminated it in glimpses.

Duwa felt a sigh escape his lips – but it wasn't his own.

'Don't worry about it,' Percy said. 'Mind giving me full control of your body for a few minutes? We're running out of time.'

Duwa barely managed to nod before Percy seized control of his limbs. Taking a few deep breaths, Percy raised their hand to filter the dusty air as best as he could, rapidly drawing mana to their abdomen. It felt strange, suddenly having mana of a brand-new affinity flood channels Duwa hadn't even possessed before.

Percy dodged the incoming creatures with practiced ease, dancing across the battlefield as Duwa's muscles brimmed with unprecedented power. Their senses sharpened and their feet grew lighter too – though Duwa knew that last part was just an illusion. He must've weighed the same as before, or Percy would've struggled even more to stay grounded. In fact, the powerful gusts did carry them up the hill whenever Percy leapt, but he kicked off the loose dirt to return to their previous position every time.

At first, Percy focused solely on dodging – at least until he saturated the new organ. Then, he began to actively seek out the cyots, punching at them as he desperately tried to replicate Duwa's success. Duwa braced himself, expecting the blows to hurt as much as before, but the creatures no longer felt as heavy, nor did their shells feel nearly as hard.

Percy's strikes boomed as they split the dust-laden air faster than arrows. Violent flares of mana burst from their chest with each throbbing heartbeat. Duwa could even feel slivers of Percy's willpower peeling away from their mana, as his guest raced to gather enough of the elusive resource to complete the trial as well.

But time was running out.

Occasionally, Duwa couldn't help but glance up at the roiling clouds. They had grown denser and deeper, arcs of crimson lightning flickering through them, painting the sky red as they prepared for their inevitable descent.

'Come on! Almost there!' Percy's voice echoed through their soul, snapping Duwa back to focus.

Duwa could feel how rapidly his guest was improving – their fists smashing through the shells like overripe fruit as they dashed headlong through the storm in search of more creatures. Like a grim reaper, Percy brushed across the battlefield, offering the cyots' lives as sacrifices to the titan's magic.

Suddenly, everything flashed red.

It took Duwa half a moment to register what had happened. The first of the god's lightning bolts had struck him, planting something inside his skull. The sound came after, a deafening boom that nearly burst his eardrums and rattled his bones. At first, he thought that was it. But then came another bolt, and a third. The titan's mana didn't injure him, though it felt increasingly unpleasant. Like a hammer, it struck again and again, slowly carving something deep into Duwa's very being.

'Percy, are you getting this too?' he asked, his voice trembling with guilt.

'Not yet,' Percy replied – not with accusation or despair, but calm determination.

There was something else too. A scarcely concealed spark of excitement, lighting the foreigner's soul ablaze. Something about the strangely coloured lightning bolt had rekindled Percy's motivation, filling him with eagerness to press on. Planting a foot on a hard patch of ground, Percy carved a crater into the hillside as he launched toward another cyot with renewed vigour. Duwa's eyes locked onto their targets with startling intensity, his guest's fists never missing their marks.

Chunks of Percy's willpower flaked away one after another, rapidly draining the core in Duwa's sternum, as a river of strength gushed through their arms. Duwa couldn't feel Percy's domain directly, but he could sense its influence on his own flesh.

Sure enough, Percy's relentless assault culminated in a violent blow that not only crushed its unfortunate recipient into bloody mist, but even continued to smash the one behind it, the force nearly shattering the bones in Duwa's fist.

'Sorry for getting a bit rough toward the end. You've got a life affinity now – fixing your hand should be a breeze,' Percy apologized.

Duwa said nothing in response, not even caring about the minor injury. His gaze returned to the sky. The crimson lightning had ceased at some point, the clouds having started to disperse.

But the heavens stirred once more following Percy's achievement, as though reconsidering whether a single serving had been enough. New arcs of lightning lit up, brewing a fresh round for someone who had arguably earned it.

Neither the southbound rush of brown winds, nor the onslaught of Orange critters had stopped – but Duwa and Percy no longer worried about either of those things all that much. With two cores thrumming with power in their body, and their self-imposed restrictions now lifted, protecting themselves from the elements would be trivial.

A second volley of lightning ensued, this time focused entirely on Percy. Unlike before, Duwa's mind remained untouched, though his ears buzzed as they endured the booming noise for the second time in quick succession. Not that it made much of a difference. Like Percy had said, Duwa was a healer now.

The only sour note was that his second core was still at the very beginning of the Green grade, while his first core was ready to advance. He'd need to discuss with his father – and possibly even Obatala Himself, given his status as a Favoured One – to determine the best way forward.

All of that could wait, however.

Right now, Duwa was more than happy to indulge in his reward. While they waited for Percy's own Approval to settle into place, Duwa tapped into the new feeling in his head, sharing his senses with his guest.

___

Duwa

Mana cores:

Domain:

Chapter 418 – Obatala's Approval

The storm raged on, occasional flashes of lightning piercing through the thick film of dust to hammer the new Decree directly into Percy's mind. Uncaring about their success in the trial, the horrific weather would persist for another week – though it wouldn't really affect Percy all that much.

Having achieved his primary objective on Gallimus, he'd be gone by then.

His borrowed heart still thrummed with excitement as he thought back to the thrill of the last few minutes. Percy didn't really blame the boy for his blunder. Consolidating his domain at the wrong moment had been an honest mistake. Even if it hadn't been, Percy didn't feel like holding it against the child.

'All's well that ends well…'

If anything, he was counting his lucky stars for choosing to undergo the Green-born's training regimen. Considering how things had gone, it really seemed like he would've missed out on the Decree if he hadn't – the mechanism granting it had clearly been willing to ignore him until he met its strict demands independently of his host.

In fact, Duwa had probably done him a favour by putting him on the spot. Without the added pressure of fighting for Obatala's Approval in the midst of the storm, Percy might not have succeeded. Despite his preparations and even cheating to fast-track the requirements, he had only made it in the nick of time. And Phoebe-knew if the clouds would have deigned to reform for him, had he allowed them to disperse completely.

'More importantly, the new Decree is even better than I thought…'

Percy felt the urge to rub his hands together.

Back when Duwa first told him about Obatala's Approval, Percy hadn't known what to expect. Decrees came in all shapes and sizes, after all. It wasn't until he saw the deep red colour of the lightning that Percy realized what he was actually dealing with.

His Status was about to get another upgrade!

Had he shown his Status to the boy during their first meeting, they might have figured this out sooner. Even Enki had known enough about Ea's Gift to identify Percy's Status as something similar, and Duwa was far more knowledgeable than the orphan.

However, Percy had grown much better over the years at keeping his thoughts from bleeding through his connection to his hosts, and he hadn't thought to volunteer this information on his own.

Regardless, it didn't matter.

Compared to the other two mental Decrees, Obatala's Approval looked rather barebones. Aside from the child's mana cores, it lacked all the other sections that Percy was familiar with. The only notable addition was the dedicated domain section, which he guessed was related to the Decree's primary function. That said, Percy knew he would be getting a lot more out of the Decree than what its creator had intended…

Still waiting for his own copy of the Approval to settle into place, Percy turned his attention to his host.

'Duwa? Wanna test your new toy?'

The boy nodded enthusiastically, before clenching his fist. Kneeling, he punched the ground, raising a wave of dirt as he left a deep imprint into the soil. Most of the force had come from Duwa's muscles, but knowing his host's physical limitations quite well by now, Percy could tell there had been a little extra layered on top.

Interestingly, the child hadn't taken any time to prepare, nor had he bothered to pull any willpower from his cores. The new Decree clearly allowed him to manifest a domain no weaker than the one he'd used against the beasts, and he could do it as easily as breathing.

Frowning, Duwa tried again, this time taking a few seconds to manually pull some additional willpower from his mana. Percy knew this was the case thanks to the gaps rapidly forming in the substance.

Before long, the boy punched another hole next to the first, digging even deeper into the dirt this time – though the difference was admittedly small. Not satisfied with that, Duwa repeated his actions a third time, leaving a crater as large as the second one, this time with no preparation again.

'This is awesome!' the Green-born exclaimed. 'Percy, are you seeing this? If I put in some effort to strengthen the domain, the extra power gets locked in, letting me use the upgraded version effortlessly from then on!'

Percy nodded internally, recalling his host's analogy of the heavy gate. Thanks to Obatala's Approval – the wedge keeping the gate from closing – Duwa could focus all his efforts into simply opening the gate farther. And whenever he gained another centimetre, he could move the wedge to the next spot too, incrementally strengthening the domain.

'Keep at it. Let's see where the limit is,' he replied.

Obviously, the boy wouldn't be able to do this infinitely. The domain was still fuelled by his willpower, which needed time to recharge. That was why the Blues Percy had faced in the past had been limited to a few concentrated blasts at most. Clearly, Duwa would be hard-pressed to achieve even that, or this would have been the most overpowered Decree in the universe.

Heeding his instructions, the Green-born repeated his actions for a while, gradually pushing his nascent domain as far as possible, pouring another drop of willpower into it with each attempt. It wasn't until a couple hours later that he stopped improving, no matter how much effort he put, or how many times he tried.

The so-called pulse had already tripled in strength compared to when he first awakened it. It was quite an impressive upgrade – especially considering that Duwa would be able to tap into this ability at a moment's notice.

Still, it wasn't even worth mentioning considering his grade – as even his strongest blast might struggle to overpower a Yellow's spell. In fact, Percy was confident his host wouldn't have even made it this far without his second core. Perhaps, the ability would still be useful layered over a regular spell, yet it wasn't without its cost. By now, Duwa's pulses had already begun to drain some of the willpower in his mana, so it was debatable whether they would even help more than they hurt during a fight.

Overall, the child hadn't grown that much stronger. Ironically, the second core Percy had given him would raise his strength a lot more than the Approval he'd spent so many seasons working towards. At the same time, they both understood that this wasn't the point of the new Decree – the nascent domain wouldn't show its true value until after the boy's advancement.

'Cool, let me try next,' Percy said eagerly.

The seed of his new Decree had finished taking root inside his own mind, though he hadn't tampered with it just yet. He wasn't looking forward to the painful process of merging it into his Status, and he also wanted to test whether he could access his domain without the Approval.

Nothing.

Percy kept trying for a few minutes, but not a single drop of willpower gathered in Duwa's hand this time. As he had suspected, each copy of the Decree only worked for its owner. If he wanted to access the power he'd unleashed on the unfortunate Orange beast again, he would have to do it manually.

'Okay, the Approval is definitely handy, but we knew that already. I wonder whether it can lock my domain across different bodies though… Probably not.'

If this worked, then Percy would be able to possess a Violet or a White, manifest an extremely powerful domain using the borrowed body, and then use Obatala's Approval to bring it back to his own.

It was definitely worth testing, but he was almost certain it wouldn't work. Domains seemed to greatly depend on one's body and core – which was why he could manifest one in Elaine's body but not his own. Yet, they also relied on one's mind and soul, which was why he and his cousin or he and Duwa had manifested separate domains while sharing the same body.

Percy was willing to bet that Obatala's Approval would only work for the whole package – body, mana core, mind and soul. If even one of those components were to change, the locked domain wouldn't be retained. That meant that Percy would still have to awaken his own domain if he wanted to have one.

Sighing, he decided to stop postponing the inevitable.

Locating the inert seed inside his mind, he willed what he imagined as a window to open, bracing himself for a world of agony. His only hope was that the two – or rather, three – Decrees would merge as “smoothly” as they had the last time.

Much like with Ea’s Gift, the window failed to open, a skull-splitting headache appearing in its stead. Percy didn’t panic, however, having expected it. If anything, it didn’t hurt as much as the last time, which had to be a good thing. Not missing a beat, he then willed his regular Status to open, ready to commence the assimilation.

Calling upon his trusty Decree caused the pain to intensify somewhat, but it had yet to reach the heights it had during his visit to Atlantis. Even better, his Status didn’t remain silent this time, a message flashing before Percy’s eyes, causing Duwa’s heart to skip a beat.

[Overlapping functionality detected. Calibrating Phoebe’s Decree. Status will remain unavailable while the assimilation is underway.]

Chapter 419 – Promising ally

Percy couldn’t help but grin.

Not only had the notification appeared immediately this time – instead of forcing him to keep trying for several minutes – the words were also crisp and readable, painting a stark contrast against the jumbled mess his Status had inflicted upon him on Atlantis.

‘Has it learned from its previous evolution how to better handle compatible Decrees? Or does it simply have more raw power to bully Obatala’s Approval after devouring Ea’s Gift?’

Either way, it was a testament to how supremely adaptable Phoebe’s Decree was. Percy had long known that its focus was the development of one’s spells, but it appeared there was so much more to it than that.

One thing that he hadn’t paid as much attention to, was how much better his Status was than its competitors at recognizing and listing new elements. It wasn’t perfect – since it clearly hadn’t learned how alchemic principles, mutations or domains worked before absorbing the other Decrees – but it had still figured out a lot of things on its own.

For example, Percy was damn sure that none of the three Decrees had been designed with spectral traits in mind, nor with the intention of listing one's Decrees, both Enki's and Duwa's pages corroborating that conclusion. His Status – even in its original state – was the only one that had seemingly comprehended those foreign concepts by itself.

Another example was the way Percy's Status had handled his clones and familiar. Granted, it was still a little rough around the edges, but just the fact that it had recognized those entities as extensions of himself, giving them specialized pages connected to his own, was quite impressive.

'I should thank her if I ever get the chance. Her Decree certainly seems quite unique…'

Would the other two have even managed to merge by themselves? Somehow, he doubted it. Had he obtained the three Decrees in a different order, the results might have not been nearly as successful. Realizing how close he may have come to vaporizing his brain, Percy couldn't help but swallow hard.

Regardless, none of that mattered now.

Percy didn't think the calibration would be over before he returned to Remior, though he was confident the final step would also go more smoothly than the previous time. If the stars aligned, he might not even have to register all his entries again.

Shifting his attention to his host, he remembered they would be parting ways soon.

'Duwa… are you going to be alright by yourself?'

Percy felt somewhat uncomfortable leaving a child in the middle of nowhere. Not to mention that they were still in the midst of a storm. Of course, he also knew that was a silly concern to have, given everything else the boy had been through – most of it before their meeting. The two-cored Green-born had already proven he could brave the wilds. Besides, the southbound winds had already stopped tossing living projectiles at them, having probably run out of cyots a while ago.

'Are you leaving?' the boy asked back, cutting through Percy's words.

Percy shrugged.

‘Depends. How long will it take you to return to civilization?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not sure where exactly we are, but I do know how to navigate. I suppose it’ll take me anywhere from thirty to fifty days. Add a few more for the storm to end, since I don’t feel like travelling through it.’

Percy leaned back on the carpet of barbed bushes, resting his host’s head on the brittle plants as he contemplated his options. The winds still howled over them, but sticking to the ground wasn’t as hard when they weren’t jumping around. Even if the pressure flipped them over, it wouldn’t hurt much.

‘I suppose I could stay a bit longer… Maybe visiting your cities would be worth my time…’ he muttered, though he shook his head soon enough. ‘Nah… I’d rather not risk meeting your gods. No offense – they sound like decent people compared to the deities I’m familiar with – but I don’t know how kind they’ll be towards an outsider. Worst case scenario, they might not let me leave. Also, I’m not looking forward to enduring this headache for months. The sooner I bring Obatala’s Approval back to my main body, the better.’

At the end of the day, this was “just”a lesser spring. Percy would be unlikely to find any resources to extend his lifespan or accelerate his advancements. From what the boy had said, it didn’t seem like the other Decrees the Gallimians had would be very useful either.

Sure, they might have a new alchemic principle for him to master, but he could just as easily find another lesser spring if he spent the same amount of time looking for one. Staying here came with too many risks and not nearly enough rewards.

Sometimes, the best thing someone could do was to quit while they were ahead.

The good news was that he wouldn’t have to worry about Duwa being mistreated by his people. Even if the Gallimians weren’t as united as the boy seemed to think, there was no way they’d harm one of their most promising Green-borns – a child who had not only completed Obatala’s trial, but also obtained a second core with a rare affinity. In fact, Percy doubted he’d have to equip the boy with a concealment bandage.

‘I suppose this is goodbye then…’ Duwa said, a hint of sadness seeping through their connection. Percy even felt the child’s eyes burn a little. Had the Gallimians’ bodies contained more water, the boy might have teared up.

‘Only for now,’ Percy replied. ‘You’ll become a god one day, won’t you? We’ll meet again out there.’

Perhaps, Percy’s greatest gain from this trip wasn’t the new Decree he’d earned, nor the mysterious herb inside his spatial seal that he still hoped might contain some gravity mana.

Rather, it was his new acquaintance.

Percy didn’t often think of his hosts as assets. Even the ones he’d enjoyed spending time with had been born at the lower grades, lacking the status or the influence to participate in interplanetary politics.

The only exception so far had been Gabe, since he had just about crossed the threshold to be eligible for godhood, but the bar was also a lot higher in the Vault, since they already had plenty of powerful gods and titans.

Duwa was different, however.

There was a decent chance the boy would grow up into not only a god, but one of his world’s leading figures. Or maybe not – the road to divinity was long and riddled with difficulties, while Duwa was only a child. Still, he at least had the potential to make it all the way.

Percy didn’t have that many enemies outside Remior yet – other than Rhaziel – but he was under no delusion that this would remain the case forever. As he continued to grow stronger, and once he began to infiltrate greater springs, he was bound to step on some toes. Thus, it wouldn’t hurt to have some powerful allies too, just in case.

Clenching his fists, the boy nodded, a wave of determination rippling through his soul.

‘I will. And I promise I’ll pay you back for all your help.’

Percy chuckled.

‘You owe me nothing, kid. We’ve both benefitted from our time together. I do hope we can stay friends though. Our people too – I’m not sure about yours, but mine could probably use a few allies.’

Methodically lifting parts of his wisp from the boy’s injuries, Percy gradually gave up his access to his host’s senses, allowing him to resume his recovery. Percy’s vision darkened and his hearing deafened as the familiar tapestry of nearby souls appeared in their place. At the same time, he felt Remior’s immense pull return with a vengeance, trying to snatch back the runaway soul that had stayed away for so many months.

Remembering something, he latched onto the boy’s soul for a couple more seconds as he spoke again.

‘Ah, I do have one final piece of advice for you…’

Duwa didn’t reply, but he perked up.

‘Try not to be so stubborn in the future…’ Percy said. ‘Rules are important, but sometimes it’s okay to break a couple.’

Duwa sniffed, seemingly saying something in response, but the words never reached Percy’s “ears”. Letting go of the child once and for all, he allowed Remior to finally whisk him away, his soul drifting through the endless expanse.

Percy’s mind still buzzed with pain, Phoebe’s Decree chewing through it as vigorously as it did Obatala’s Approval. Yet, that did very little to dampen Percy’s enthusiasm as he pondered over all the tangible benefits he was about to deliver to his main body.

Leaving aside the modest willpower-infused pulses he might or might not be able to unleash, or his eventual promotion to Blue that was still centuries away, there was something else he hoped the new Decree would do for him a lot sooner.

It would add a “domain” section to his Status.

For anyone else, this wouldn’t have meant much. What difference did a few extra words make, when he couldn’t yet tap into their true purpose?

Except, Percy wasn’t “anyone else”. He had a pair of mutated eyes that hungered for any source of information they could learn from. And if his guess was right, the interaction of Ea’s and Obatala’s Decrees would lead to something big…

Chapter 420 – Reaper

Harrin sighed as he gauged his companions’ excited expressions.

Being the only Yellow-born in their little group, he was by far the youngest of the three Blues. Shouldn’t the roles have been reversed? Weren’t his elders supposed to be the level-headed ones – and he, the impulsive junior they had to rein in?

‘I guess I can’t really blame them…’

The Root had already raised their target’s bounty twice since he started slaughtering his pursuers. It had come as a real shock to the noble Houses, hammering home the fact that killing the Holy Children hadn’t been a fluke, but a true testament to the Red-born’s overwhelming strength.

Few families had been able to join the hunt to begin with, and even fewer had dared to continue after watching their competitors lose their most prized assets one after another. Some even thought that the Root was in the wrong here – that the Green-born boy had had it coming, and that Remior was blessed to have produced such a talented young man.

But that was a minority opinion.

Still, two hundred million contribution points went a long way in persuading people to take their chances. A medium-sized family like Harrin’s could survive for several years on that alone. That was why many Houses had doubled down on their efforts, sending even more people after the Red-born.

The patriarch of Harrin's family wasn't just thinking about the money though.

With House Tantalus out of the picture and House Avalon hanging by a thin thread, the entire Camelot province was ripe for taking. One of the main reasons Harrin's House hadn't made a move just yet was because their target's ties to his birthplace were still up in the air.

Disowned. Excommunicated. On the run.

All of that was true, but it wasn't like Archibald had had much of a choice in the matter. There was always a slim chance that Percival still loved his relatives and would sweep in to avenge them should anyone attack. Taking an entire family on would be impossible even for him, but the last thing any noble House needed was a Blue-killing monster hunting their elites down one by one.

'And yet, here we are… delivering ourselves to him on a silver platter…'

Harrin shifted nervously atop the stone slab he was using to fly. It was more spacious and arguably more comfortable than the rolling river or the strands of lightning carrying the others, but that did little to alleviate his worries. Scanning the expanse of scarce, snow-covered trees stretching beneath, he searched for signs of the fugitive or his pet – honestly hoping he wouldn't find any.

The idea behind their mission was simple enough.

The Red-born was unnaturally strong, yes – but not unbeatable. Many of the teams searching for him had reported something quite interesting: he always fled from groups with three or more Blues, only engaging the smaller teams. One family had been dumb enough to only send a single person – their most talented mage, no less. To this day, they were still crying over their dead prodigy.

In any case, this discrepancy spoke to the Red-born's limits. As strong as he was, two Blues were clearly the most he could handle at once.

The realization had further discouraged many noble Houses from continuing the hunt. Bounty or not, two Blues were already a huge investment for most of them – let alone three. Some might have had the spare manpower before, but they'd lost their chance after recklessly sending a couple of their strongest people to their deaths.

Currently, there were only a few dozen groups scouring the wildlands for the Red-born, each containing either three or four members. The Great Houses were the only ones who had sent multiple teams. At some point, their target was bound to grow tired or make a mistake – only to find himself cornered by a group he couldn't evade, or pinned down by several.

"Even if we find him, he'll just escape. We don't have the means to contain him," Harrin muttered.

"Hmm? Are you still going on about that?" Aunt Remilia asked. Twisting her palms, she adjusted the magnetic force holding her up, the bolts of indigo crackling around her hands as she drifted closer to him. "We don't have to be the ones to kill the kid – we just need to put more pressure on him. Losing the bounty will sting, but our priority is to get him out of the picture by any means necessary. As long as we can gobble up a chunk of the province, it'll be worth it."

Harrin nodded. He was about to respond when he caught something out of the corner of his eye.

Jerking his head to the right, he saw a dark spot shooting rapidly toward them. A heartbeat later, he vaguely recognized the silhouette of a bird. Another beat after that, he saw the person standing on its back, seemingly dressed in simple clothes while confidently looking at them.

Harrin's blood froze in his veins, his heart working overtime to keep pumping it.

It was him.

And he wasn't fleeing.

Clenching his fists, Harrin let his fingernails dig into his palms, using the sting to jolt himself out of his stupor.

'What am I panicking about? We can still beat him!'

Even if Percival had suddenly grown bold enough to raise the bar, this was bound to be a tough fight for him. They should be fine, as long as they remained careful.

Unleashing his domain, Harrin allowed it to unfold in a wide area around him, the others following suit – having also noticed their target.Soon, the oversized crow dove into the blob of willpower, its flying speed instantly halving as a result.

Not missing a beat, the Yellow leapt off the creature's back, his arms spreading wide as he hurled over a dozen grey sticks in every direction. His muscles swelled and his skin reddened, as both his body and his constructs ignited, the grey flames devouring the ambient mana at a speed that would've made even a Green blush.

The sticks grew and shattered, filling the air with countless more copies. Stepping on the first pair of crossed shafts, Percival's body flared with mana for the briefest instant, before appearing on a different pair of sticks, tens of metres away.

And he wasn't the only one.

The Red-born's body was suddenly clad in a strange armour fashioned entirely out of his mana, an exact copy of him manifesting on a third platform in the opposite direction – or wait… which one was the copy again? They both looked the same.

By the time the booming shockwave from Percival's first jump reached Harrin's ears, the man's two silhouettes had turned into four, already stepping on a fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh platform.

Like a burning flower, the mana-forged army of phantoms bloomed outwards, each violent step rippling through the air like a thunderclap. At first, Harrin thought the sounds would betray the original's location, but he couldn't have been more wrong. The cacophony of gleeful cries helped mask the source of the noise, as the images mixed and danced in a wild yet intricate formation, the Red-born's real body constantly disappearing into the growing crowd.

Gritting his teeth, Harrin forced his domain to expand farther still, his teammates mirroring his actions.

The willpower covered an even broader region, enveloping several times the volume. Licking the fragile illusions – they had to be, right? – with his will, Harrin squeezed them from every direction, shredding them apart. There wasn't nearly enough force behind the paper-thin domains to injure the original, but that was okay – as long as they revealed his position.

Yet, when Harrin shifted his gaze back to his target, he only caught sight of four bursts of grey mana, each closer than the last, linked by a burning trail that led straight toward…

'Shit.'

Realizing the danger he was in, Harrin hastily pulled whatever mana he could from his core, barely managing to coat his body in a thick layer of stone and willpower in time to block the scythes' vicious edges. The blades shattered violently against his defences as the Red-born came to a halt on another platform behind Harrin. The other Blues quickly launched their spells at Percival, forcing him to retreat.

Harrin wasn't paying them any attention, however. He couldn't help but rub his neck, ignoring the sting as he felt the sticky liquid on his fingers, and the pungent scent of iron filling his nostrils. Every hair on his body stood on end as he realized how close he had come to losing his life.

'All it takes is one mistake…'

Swallowing hard, he scanned his surroundings once again, determined to aid his companions.

But what he saw shook him.

Countless curved blades – Harrin had no idea when Percival had even managed to produce so many – had pierced Yikon's defences, the ominous visage of some ferocious creature enveloping the sharp constructs as they chewed through both the Blue and the azure sphere "protecting" him. The domain-infused liquid might as well have been regular water…

To his left, he saw the monstrous crow spin like a frigid tornado, barrelling through Aunt Remilia's spells with ease. Indigo arcs of lightning zapped at the bird's mana-lit plumage, inflicting numerous nasty burns. But it didn't seem to care. Reaching her, it snapped its oversized beak around her torso, cleaving it right in half, a rain of blood and gore painting the previously pristine pieces of ice on its body crimson.

By the time Harrin had wrapped his mind around the carnage, he felt something pierce through him – a crescent blade sticking out of his chest. It hadn't drawn a single drop of blood this time, but the pain was agonizing as it tore through his very being with ease.

Barely turning his head enough to look over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of the man's glowing eyes, their slit pupils cutting through him as everything turned black.

'So, this is him, huh?' Harrin wondered, a bitter smile forming over his lips.

This was the alchemist who had invented the Aurora Dew and slain two Holy Children. The Yellow who had killed over twenty Blues and turned their world upside down. The fugitive worth two hundred million points – along with his harrowing pet.

Percival Avalon… the Spectral Reaper.