Wanderer 441

Chapter 441 – Ancestral Lineage Sect

Colours rippled faintly through the square tiles, the runes softly pulsating at set intervals. The floor was made of reinforced materials and further enchanted on top of that. It was clearly designed to withstand – or at least undo in real time – the damage caused by Violet-level spells.

Kassorith stood by the edge of the arena alongside the other contestants, waiting for the tournament's managers to announce the start of the competition. Several rows of spectator seats towered over them, packed to the brim with people. They were protected by a thick, transparent dome that had also been enchanted to the high heavens.

All things considered, the venue reminded Percy of the blood-stained coliseum on Huehue.

'Only, this isn't a place for slaves forced to fight for their lives… Just willing participants – here for fame, glory and rewards…'

According to Kassorith, the lives of the contestants weren't at risk. The arena had been enchanted by an actual god to protect them the moment they were about to receive a lethal wound. Of course, it was still in their best interest to avoid ending up in that situation, as they would be disqualified should the enchantments activate.

Either way, Percy was quite impressed by the runework involved. Even though the Thess'kalans' enchantments fell a little short compared to the Vault's, a large-scale project like this arena – and one personally built by such high-level individuals – was leaps and bounds above what Percy was currently capable of.

Especially since this pillar wasn't the only one of its kind. Seven more were faintly visible in the distance, every single one of them matching in height. Percy didn't think the Thess'kalans had just happened to find eight equally tall pillars at the same place, so he guessed that they had been cut short on purpose – to give the contestants the same conditions throughout the tournament.

And these were just the venues for the Blue grade of this particular regional tournament. Eight more were located farther away for the Violets, and nine similar competitions could be found elsewhere across the planet. They needed that many because Kassorith's tournament alone would involve

hundreds of fights. The early rounds, at least, had to be conducted in parallel, or the event would drag on for months.

The mist wasn't very thick inside the arena either. Percy guessed there were enchantments for that too – keeping the clouds away from the summit of the pillars. Not that the decreased visibility would have made a huge difference to the elite Blues fighting, but there seemed to be low-born children among the spectators. This was also the reason the pillars were so short, otherwise some of the kids would have trouble breathing.

'Who gets to watch these tournaments anyway?' Percy asked, still unclear on the greater spring's demographics.

Based on what his host had told him, he assumed that the planet was full of powerful sects that functioned similarly to the noble Houses on Remior. Obviously, there were way more of them here, and the average grade of their members was much higher, but they were still military organizations focused on cultivating new bloodlines and spells, competing against one another for resources and influence, occasionally producing powerful gods and demigods as a result.

'A lot of the crowd comes from the sects themselves. The leaders want to see how their subordinates perform – but also to keep up with the development of their rivals, scout new members, and get ideas for new avenues of research,' Kassorith explained. 'But we have more than just sects on Thess'kala. There are lots of small villages scattered atop the pillars – like the one you found me in. We also have many large cities, with factions that focus on arts, commerce and other things unrelated to combat. Many of the richer folk bring their families here for entertainment. There are actually even more watching from home via transmission enchantments.'

Percy drew a sharp breath at that. His host hadn't lied when he said these regional tournaments were a big deal. Even though his life wasn't at risk – and his existence wasn't known to anyone but Kassorith and Syrreneth – he couldn't help but feel a pang of unease at the thought of being watched by millions of people. After all, he was used to fighting in remote locations, rarely leaving any survivors behind.

'I really hope nobody recognizes Metatron's runes.'

The good news was that only gods and demigods who had left the planet before stood a chance of having encountered the Vault's magiscript in their travels. Percy had no idea if such people would even bother watching these tournaments. Even if they did, there were over a hundred venues around the planet, so those focusing on Kassorith's fights would be even fewer.

That should be the case during the early rounds, at least.

The better Percy and his host did, and the higher up the rankings they climbed, the more eyes would fall on them, however, and the more attention they would receive. Percy's only hope at that point would be that anyone who found Kassorith's abilities strange would wait until after the tournament to approach him. By then, Percy would be gone, and his host wouldn't be able to tell them much.

Oblivious to Percy's thoughts, the Blue went back to examining his new tunic, his fingers gently tracing over the violet embroidery. A shit-eating grin was plastered all over his reptilian face – or the closest expression somebody with just a pair of long fangs could make. Kassorith had been like this ever since they passed the evaluation a couple of weeks ago, still gleeful over his newly elevated status.

'How vain are you?' Percy asked, rolling their eyes. 'It's just a piece of cloth.'

Granted, he was also happy they'd earned the trim, but only because the elder conducting the assessment had seemed hesitant to pass them. Kassorith could certainly unleash some powerful attacks – especially after the addition of Percy's runes – but his strength was lacking in other areas. Luckily, the Violet had ultimately decided that Kassorith's overall ability was more deserving than undeserving of the trim.

'You don't understand,' the Thess'kalan snapped back indignantly. 'Being an elite disciple will massively affect how I'm treated in the sect. I'll get more resources and be allowed to choose my own missions from now on.'

'Aren't you worried that you'll be exposed as a fraud the moment I leave?' Percy asked, mostly to tease his host.

He still hadn't told him about the second core that would eventually change his life for real. In fact, he wasn't sure Kassorith would even discover the Decree on his own within the next century. The Blue relied on his bloodline to regenerate his body, so Percy doubted the man came into contact with life mana that often. Thus, accidentally learning about his second core would probably take a while.

‘Not really. Like I previously said, nine out of ten elite disciples buy or cheat their way in, so there’s an unwritten rule to let them be. Nobody dares to ask them to prove their strength, as people don’t want to piss the wrong demigod off. Once you get the trim, it’s extremely difficult to lose it.’

Percy felt a bad taste in his mouth – not only because he disapproved of this rotten system, but also because he didn’t like the thought of having permanently raised his asshole host’s status in the eyes of his people.

He had yet to decide how to deal with Kassorith. On one hand, the idea of using somebody – even one as twisted as his current host – and then discarding him the moment he got what he wanted didn’t sit well with him. On the other, he didn’t want to leave a monster who would inevitably go on to slaughter more villages alive – especially after helping him grow even stronger. This was the same reason Percy had chosen to put down Rambert back in the Whistling Woods.

‘I’ll deal with things as they come,’ he thought, sighing inwards.

For now, he had to borrow the Blue’s strength to get the life-extending leaf from Thess’kala. As for what happened later? Perhaps the most humane option would be to dump Kassorith in the Vault, where he wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone else in the short term.

Hopefully.

Not that giving Metatron another pawn – a two-cored Blue with an extended lifespan and a composite affinity, no less – was much better, but it would likely be centuries or even millennia before the Thess’kalan was powerful enough for the titan to deploy on external missions. Maybe Percy would find another solution by then.

‘I have to make a few concessions here and there. I’ll never reach godhood if I let opportunities like this slip by,’ he reminded himself.

“Greetings, ladies and gentlemen,”a booming voice said, breaking Percy out of his thoughts. The speaker was an elderly White who stood at the centre of the arena, though the sound was clearly amplified and projected by countless enchantments all over the stadium. Judging by his gold-trimmed tunic, this person was either the master of an influential sect, or somebody powerful enough to compete for such a position.

“As you all know, we are here today to watch the fifth block of the preliminary rounds, of the sixth region’s 356,432nd annual tournament. The rules are the same as always, so I won’t bore you with them. That said, one thing is very different this year. Our esteemed sponsor, the Ancestral Lineage Sect, has made a generous contribution to the tournament’s prize pool.”

The White paused for a moment as hushed murmurs spread through the stadium, among both contestants and spectators. Kassorith also seemed taken aback by the announcement, flicking his forked tongue with unconcealed greed. Percy was about to ask his host what the commotion was for when the sect master spoke again.

“Many of you seem to have guessed it already,” he chuckled. “This isn’t the first time one of our patrons graces our competition – our world’s leading sects often reward our most promising disciples with powerful techniques and unique treasures. Nevertheless, this is a special occasion, because the Ancestral Lineage Sect’s contribution is a very costly one. Naturally, there aren’t enough portions for all of today’s participants, so the primary ingredient for the ritual can only be selected from the prize pool after winning the third round. That said, the secondary ingredients can still be claimed earlier. One per round. Thus, our contestants are welcome to begin accumulating them from the start if they feel confident in reaching the top thirty-two.”

The old mage let his words linger once again, mostly for dramatic effect, before continuing.

“In summary, a few of our most talented young men and women have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to greatly – and permanently – enhance their physique!”

Chapter 442: Greater Thess’kalan Physique

Two Blues fought above the arena, giant balls of molten lava splashing frequently on the translucent barrier shielding the spectators, before rolling harmlessly down its smooth surface.

The scorching liquid pooled at the edges of the arena, inconveniencing the other Blues waiting there for their own battles. Most of them used their domains to protect themselves from the substance, though one of the elite disciples seemed entirely unbothered – almost as if he could tell in advance that the composite mana wasn’t going to end up anywhere near him.

Percy and Kassorith were also standing in that crowd, holding the magma at bay with a wall of willpower. Perhaps, it would have been more prudent of them to spend this time either watching the

cataclysmic battle taking place above their heads or observing the other contestants around them, trying to gauge the strength of their soon-to-be opponents.

Neither of them was interested in doing that, however, their minds still occupied by the sect leader's words. Kassorith in particular had practically been drooling since the revelation. Percy couldn't really blame his host for that either, since he could also tell that this body-tempering thing had to be something good.

'Enhancing your physique? How does that even work?' he asked, though he tried to contain his excitement. No matter what this reward did, Percy didn't know if it could be used by a human.

Kassorith frowned upon hearing his question, apparently having forgotten for a moment that he was sharing his body with another. A wave of apprehension rippled through his soul as he hesitated to respond.

'Really?' Percy rolled their eyes at his host's reaction. 'Need I remind you that you wouldn't even be participating in the tournament if not for me? Or do you suddenly think you can get through three rounds without my help?'

Kassorith sighed.

'I want to keep the resources if we make it that far. Don't forget that it's my body and core that give us most of our strength. Even your domain and runes wouldn't be possible without my grade and affinity. Why don't you just get your leaf and fuck right off? Isn't that what you came here for in the first place?'

A pang of sardonic laughter escaped Percy's wisp as he listened to his host's sheer audacity. He was tempted to say something harsh, but he held himself back. Arguing with the bastard right before the tournament wouldn't benefit either of them.

'Look, the White said we can only get the main ingredient for the ritual after the third round, but he didn't say we're only allowed one. We need to win four times anyway to get to the leaf – so we might both be able to get a portion…'

Kassorith didn't reply immediately, seemingly contemplating Percy's words.

‘I suppose that may be possible,’ he conceded, if somewhat unwillingly. ‘But that would mean giving up on the other rewards. The ritual isn’t the only valuable thing in the prize pool. And we’ll need two sets of secondary ingredients too, if we want the complete version of the ritual.’

‘Complete version? How does it differ from the regular?’ Percy asked, realizing that this Ancestral Lineage Sect was quite famous among Thess’kalans, even though this ritual of theirs was supposedly difficult to come by.

‘The base version only strengthens our body, but there are two optional modifications. The first also sharpens our thermal vision and improves our resistance to heat and cold. The second increases the potency of our venom, and our body’s resistance to toxins.’

Percy creased his brow upon hearing that. These traits sounded an awful lot like something one would find in a beast’s body – not a sapient’s. Then again, this wasn’t news to him. The fact that his host possessed tools like venom or thermal vision had struck him as odd ever since he found himself on Thess’kala.

‘I know what you are thinking,’ Kassorith said upon noticing his confusion. ‘You’re not wrong. These physical traits are things we have inherited from our beast ancestors. Like most sapients in the universe, losing our beast affinities has gradually caused our bodies to weaken. With every generation, our venom grows less potent and our senses duller. At least, this was the case until the Ancestral Lineage Sect came along with their special bloodline.’

A bloodline…

Of course.

Whenever an entire group of people developed some weird ability that they had no business possessing, it was often the result of either a Decree, or someone’s bloodline. And since bloodlines were brought about thanks to a Decree, it all came down to the number of gods and titans a world possessed. Both were things a greater spring had in spades.

But Percy didn’t interrupt his host, waiting for the rest of Kassorith’s explanation.

‘At first, their bloodline appeared useless. It did slow down the degradation of their ancestral abilities, yet the effect was subtle, and their physique had already weakened greatly by then. Eventually, they invented a ritual to preserve the potency of their blood even after death, allowing them to pass it to their disciples. After generations of repeated usage, they managed to recover a fraction of their bodies’ latent power, giving birth to the Greater Thess’kalan Physique. It still isn’t as good as the original, nor does it scale as well with one’s grade, but it’s far better than what should be possible without a beast affinity.’

Percy rubbed his borrowed chin thoughtfully. It was a great reward, though that still didn’t tell him whether a non-Thess’kalan could undergo the ritual. As a human, Percy possessed neither venom of his own, nor the ability to sense the temperature of his surroundings. Perhaps, his species had their own set of long-forgotten abilities, lying dormant within their blood, but it remained a question whether this ritual could awaken any of them.

Then again, it might not be impossible for him to acquire at least a part of the Thess’kalan physique. Based on what Kassorith said, the ritual didn’t necessarily depend on the recipient as much as it did on the person passing their lineage to another.

‘Why would they share something this valuable with outsiders though?’ Percy asked, thinking of a different problem.

Kassorith shrugged. ‘Mostly for selfish reasons. Someone with a strengthened physique can pass it to their offspring even without the bloodline or the ritual. If done that way, the lineage will inevitably start degrading again, but it takes many generations to weaken. It’s in the sect’s best interest to spread their lineage across Thess’kala every few centuries, to raise the average quality of our blood. A rising tide lifts all boats – and all that. After all, they recruit new members from outside the sect – like everyone does – so they don’t want their new disciples’ physiques to have a low starting point. Also, the elite disciples who rank at the top of these tournaments are some of our most promising candidates to become gods in the future. Stronger gods help Thess’kala rise in the cosmic hierarchy.’

Percy nodded, not disagreeing with any of that. Though he couldn’t help but latch on to something his host had said.

‘Every couple of centuries? And you’re telling me I was lucky enough that this happened right when I joined the tournament?’ he asked, finding this difficult to believe.

Kassorith shook his head, however.

‘I think you are forgetting where you are… This is a greater spring – not the average barren shithole you visit on your travels. The ritual is certainly a great opportunity, but it’s far from the only valuable reward to find its way into the competition. Despite what the announcer said to spur the crowd’s excitement, there’s something just as good almost every time. Last year, the Enchanted Scale Sect offered a chance to have a demigod personally inscribe every scale on one’s body with an enchantment of their choosing. Four years ago, the Profound Alchemic Institute offered a free, thirty-year tuition to their academy. Keep in mind that they don’t usually let outsiders join – for no amount of money. And they’re one of Thess’kala’s leading alchemist organizations.’

Percy’s eyes widened as he realized just how many amazing opportunities were available on Thess’kala every year. Perhaps, having the chance to compete for this ritual that might or might not even do anything positive to his body wasn’t quite the lucky break he thought it was. In fact, spending three decades studying alchemy on a greater spring might have been a far better reward for him – if somewhat time-consuming.

Alas, there was no point lamenting on what wasn’t meant to be.

‘Okay… How about this? We’ll take turns picking rewards from the prize pool – assuming we keep winning, of course. Keep in mind that I could have just blackmailed you into giving me everything, but I’d rather we both have a mutual interest to not try and sabotage each other. I’ll even give you the first pick.’

‘How magnanimous of you…’ Kassorith laughed, the bastard having the gall to employ sarcasm even as Percy extended an olive branch. ‘Are you planning to go for the ritual too?’

‘I don’t know,’ Percy said. ‘It’s great if it works on me, but I’m not sure I want to waste three rewards on an unknown. I suppose I’ll have to browse through the rest of the options and see if there’s anything better for me.’

In any case, they’d have to win a total of six rounds to earn enough ingredients for two complete rituals. That was already enough to get them to the semi-finals, which would be even harder than earning Percy’s life-extending leaf. Then again, that was only true if they picked all the optional modifications. If they each forsook one, they could have enough ingredients for the ritual by the time they made the top sixteen. Since Percy didn’t even have thermal vision or venom of his own, he would rather prioritize strengthening his body.

If it worked, it might let him draw some more power out of the Carnival, and maybe even use it alongside the Yellow trollsfury tattoos he was planning to give himself as soon as he registered the compression principle. As things stood, the Orange version of the ink barely did anything, and he wasn't sure his body could handle both his boosting art and a tattoo matching his grade.

"Ahem… number fifty-three… please step onto the arena," the White announcer said, sounding irritated.

Only then did Percy realize that the previous battle had ended, and everyone was staring at his host – or more specifically, at the circular plate with the number fifty-three written on it.

It was finally their turn.

Chapter 443 – First round

Percy and his host had decided to try and keep the second domain and the enchanted swords secret for as long as they could. Kassorith's all-out attack wasn't that hard to avoid once their opponent knew it was coming, so they understood they couldn't keep relying on it. Still, they hoped it would be enough to at least get them through the first fight. It was an ambitious – if somewhat risky – strategy.

Sadly, things didn't go according to plan.

As soon as the announcer declared the start of the battle, their opponent began to release large volumes of pink mist from her body, instantly lowering visibility in the arena. At first, Percy thought that it wouldn't affect them too much. Between their thermal sense and Mana Sense, they should have all the tools they needed to see right through the substance.

He couldn't have been more wrong. Within seconds, it became apparent that the mist was boiling hot, greatly affecting Kassorith's ability to lock onto the woman's body heat. Even worse, the substance was dense with Blue mana, making their opponent all but invisible.

'What even is this? It can't be a steam affinity, can it?'

Steam mana – the very same that Femel, the Holy Child that Elaine had killed inside the Thirsty Valley had wielded – was the fusion of fire and water. Among all the common, composite and rare affinities Percy had ever heard of, it was the closest match to the woman's mist. Still, he had no explanation for its strange colour.

Did the woman possess a blessing too – on top of having a composite affinity?

Under other circumstances, running into somebody this talented would have been unthinkable. Then again, Percy didn't forget where he was or who he was facing. These elite disciples were among the best mages a greater spring had to offer.

However, it soon became clear that his initial assessment wasn't entirely correct. The moment the substance reached Kassorith's nostrils, a wave of dizziness slammed into their head, almost knocking them off the flying greatsword. Percy's host was forced to climb even higher in search of clean air. He even summoned a handful of spinning longswords by his side to keep the toxic gas away.

'It's poison,' the Blue guessed. 'But it's not the corrosive kind you'd get from an acid affinity. I bet it's the result of a bloodline rather than an affinity or a blessing. She mixes it into her steam to knock her opponents out.'

The good news was that its effect didn't seem that potent. They probably had Kassorith's innate resistance to toxins to thank for that. Had it been a human Blue facing the woman, they might have passed out already. However, that didn't mean that Percy and his host could afford to breathe the substance for an extended period of time with no repercussions.

Having to keep their distance from the mist was just the start of their trouble. Kassorith's all-out attack could only be unleashed once, and would leave them vulnerable afterwards. They had to make sure they located the woman before firing it, but she had hidden herself well inside the mist. Finding her was becoming even harder by the second as the substance kept accumulating in the arena, the thick plume of scorching poison slowly rising toward them.

Their opponent appeared more than happy to wait. She hadn't made any other moves. She merely released her corrupted mana at a leisurely and, most importantly, sustainable pace, slowly increasing her advantage.

‘Any ideas?’ Kassorith asked.

Percy didn’t immediately respond. They could hurl weaker spells at her and hope they got lucky, but even a Blue with low mobility wouldn’t have much trouble dodging a bunch of isolated and unfocused attacks like that. The only thing they would achieve would be to deplete their mana faster than her.

The best approach would probably be to push their domain to the floor of the arena and use it to funnel the mist away. Not only would that get rid of the poison, it would allow them to locate their target. The problem was that the woman clearly knew what she was doing. Percy wouldn’t be surprised if she had trained herself in fighting like this her whole life. Maybe she didn’t participate in a tournament every day, but she was likely used to ambushing her opponents in enclosed spaces where they couldn’t get rid of her poison.

Since the very start of the battle, she’d been fighting against Kassorith’s domain with her own, protecting her advantage. She even seemed to know how to shape it so that they couldn’t tell which way it was emanating from as she moved silently around the battlefield.

‘I’ve got nothing… Not unless we want to reveal our trump cards earlier than planned,’ Percy ultimately said.

If he piled his domain on top of his host’s, they would quickly overpower their opponent’s, forcing her out of hiding. Alternatively, his sharpness and lightness runes would improve both the potency and the speed of Kassorith’s attacks without adding to their mana cost, allowing them to hit her more easily or even win in a battle of attrition. That said, they didn’t want to concede one of their future advantages so early into the tournament. Their opponents would only grow stronger the farther they progressed, so they had to get used to winning under unfavourable conditions.

Kassorith clicked his tongue. ‘What’s her goal anyway? She doesn’t seem to be in a rush to attack…’

Listening to his host’s question, Percy couldn’t help but crease his brow.

‘Right… is she planning to outlast us?’

As far as he could tell, the tournament's battles didn't have a time limit – they could potentially go on for days, since Blues could stay awake and even fight for a long time. However, Kassorith would have to land somewhere eventually. Flying atop his greatsword didn't consume much mana, but keeping it airborne for hours on end was mentally taxing. What the woman was doing with her mana and her own domain wasn't costless either, but she was probably used to fighting like this.

Was she betting on them passing out from exhaustion before she did?

It certainly made sense, since Kassorith wasn't allowed to touch down anywhere outside the arena. If he grew tired first, his only option would be to fall into her trap.

'What an insidious way to fight,' Kassorith said, though he didn't sound very annoyed. If anything, the realization seemed to have put him at ease.

It was a good strategy – one that neither the spectators who had come here for entertainment, nor the other contestants waiting patiently for their own fights would appreciate. It would have likely worked on almost anyone else. It wasn't against the rules either, nor did the woman seem to give a shit what anybody thought. Unfortunately for her, they couldn't have matched her with a worse opponent.

Percy grinned. 'Never thought I'd find myself challenged to a staying-awake contest… Let's see which one of us lasts the longest.'

Hours passed, with the two combatants doing nothing but stabilizing their dominion over their side of the battlefield. The pink mist was thickest near the floor of the arena, but it had slowly risen higher. Still, there was a limit to how high the wall of poison could reach without scattering. Once it surpassed the invisible barrier protecting the spectators, it had nothing to box it in. The gas wanted to spread in all sorts of random directions, and the woman's domain wasn't strong enough to hold it in place that far away from her body. Certainly not while fighting off Kassorith's. As for the latter, he just had to stay afloat a few dozen metres above the floor and make sure that the substance never reached him again.

The crowd booed as they watched this most-boring battle unfold – or rather, refuse to unfold. Even the other contestants seemed to join in at some point, cursing at the woman's twenty generations of ancestors for giving birth to such an annoying mage. Percy and Kassorith didn't care in the slightest about any of that, however, knowing full well that they had this one in the bag. Instead, they talked about other things to pass the time.

‘I’ve noticed that many of your people have composite affinities,’ Percy said at some point.

Other than Kassorith and his current opponent, there was also the lava user from the previous battle, and an ice mage who had participated three fights earlier. Given the fact that they were dealing with elite disciples, some special affinities were only to be expected. Still, rare affinities were supposed to emerge at similar rates to composite ones, yet Percy hadn’t seen as many of those on Thess’kala. It was either a huge coincidence, or something else was going on.

‘Most of them are acquired,’ Kassorith said, before elaborating. ‘Mine is innate – I inherited it from my mother. But a lot of the people you’ll meet in this tournament started off with a common affinity and got it upgraded using some rare treasure.’

Percy perked up at the sound of that. He’d thought that resources like the Lotus of a Myriad Rivers which had caused such a stir on Remior were hard to come by. That didn’t seem to apply to a greater spring.

‘Do you think there will be any such treasures in the reward pool?’

‘Probably.’ Kassorith shrugged. ‘Don’t expect to find one that can grant a rare affinity though. They do exist, but they’re extremely difficult to find, even for the strongest worlds.’

Percy couldn’t help but sigh in disappointment. He might have chosen not to change his pure affinity to a common one, but he was still holding out for something better. A life affinity which he knew would pair well with his bloodline would be ideal, but he wouldn’t have said no to something like time or space either.

‘Well, I suppose that a composite affinity is still on the table if I grab a couple of different treasures…’ he reminded himself.

Percy was admittedly a little envious of his familiar for having two extra sets of mana channels and so many options to choose from during a fight. Perhaps, if he could obtain “petals” capable of granting an earth and a lightning affinity, he could consume them both to get a metal one like Kassorith.

It would be just as good for runecrafting as his pure mana – if not better, in some ways. There was a good chance he would be able to fuse it with his soul mana to produce a "phantom" variant too. The only thing he wasn't sure about was whether it could be spun into some kind of silk for him to use with his trait. As for the cyan powder that he needed for the Aurora Dew, it was no longer even a concern. Percy could use his Spiritforged Effigy to swiftly produce enough crystallized mana to last for decades – or even centuries – before changing his affinity. Even storage wouldn't be an issue, since he had more empty spatial amulets than he knew what to do with.

Then again, this might not be the best idea. A metal affinity would definitely be a lot more suitable for him than water, but it might be best to wait – just in case he found something even better down the line.

'Let's see what they have first. No sense in worrying about this now. Maybe I can pick something for Nesha or Elaine instead…'

Percy fully intended to prioritise himself, of course. Not only that, but he would rather pick things exclusive to Thess'kala if he could help it. The rest, he could find elsewhere, since he hoped and expected to visit more greater springs in the future. That said, eight rewards were plenty – assuming that he and Kassorith made it to the very end of the tournament – and Percy would be keeping half of them according to their agreement. He wouldn't rule out the possibility of choosing one or two for his friends.

"Are you planning to stay up there forever?!" a female voice suddenly asked, piercing through the pink mist.

"Depends," Kassorith replied with a chuckle. "Are you going to withdraw your poison and fight me properly?"

The response wasn't immediate.

"I can do this longer than you!" the woman eventually shouted, though the unease in her voice betrayed her inner doubt.

"Then shut up and keep pumping out mana," Kassorith said.

This was probably the first time since Percy arrived on Thess'kala that he didn't disapprove of his host's snarky remarks, the woman having somehow managed to make herself even more annoying than Kassorith.

Eventually, the sun set, the film of clouds above everyone's heads getting darker as a result. The crowd grew quieter too, probably getting sick of booing for so many hours. Some still shouted every now and then, while many had chosen to leave the stadium altogether. Perhaps, they planned to return a couple of days later, once the match was over. Or maybe not even then, having decided the event wasn't their cup of tea. Most had remained, however, resigning themselves to waiting patiently for the frustrating fight to end.

The sun rose and then set again.

And again.

By the fourth day, Percy and Kassorith felt quite tired. Their core burned from overuse, as even the slow trickle of mana keeping the greatsword afloat had begun to take its toll. Their head pounded like crazy. Even though the Insomnia trait had eliminated their need for sleep, it couldn't help them keep their domains deployed for days on end. At least, they'd cheated somewhat, taking turns to push against their opponent's willpower. They couldn't stack their domains without revealing their secret weapon, but nothing stopped them from using them one at a time.

All things considered, the fight wasn't going great for them, but they knew the woman couldn't be having a good time either. She also had to constantly release the poisoned steam, and she had nobody to help her keep her domain active, nor did she possess a spectral trait to prevent her eyelids from drooping. It was just a matter of time before she collapsed.

It had to be.

Sure enough, the woman seemed to finally realize that this was a lost cause on the fifth day. The flow of mist stopped early in the afternoon, her domain receding as she spoke,

"Fine, you prick! I guess you want to win this more badly than I do! I surrender!"

Chapter 444 – Clear

Percy and Kassorith watched in silence as their opponent slithered off the stage, her defeat already being swept away by the crowd's reaction.

Only now – after having "fought" the woman for several mind-numbing days – did Percy bother to study her appearance. He had no idea what passed for beauty among the Thess'kalans, but he could admit the woman had a certain elegance to her. Her frame was lithe and willowy, her movements fluid in a way that reminded him of a wind-chime drifting through water.

Her tunic hung open at the front, as was common among the people of her race, leaving her narrow, scaled chest exposed. Thess'kalans didn't nurse their young, so they lacked certain body parts that one would see in a human – no breasts, no navel, not even a hint of modesty. Suffice to say, there was no taboo against the females here slithering around topless. But cultural peculiarities like that barely registered with Percy anymore – especially when he had other things to worry about.

'You know, we could have ended this a lot sooner if I hadn't wasted all of my soul mana to stitch your injuries up…' he said with a mental sigh.

While the woman's poisoned steam had concealed her from Kassorith's thermal sense and Mana Sense, Percy was certain he would have spotted her in an instant via Soul Vision. Then again, he didn't necessarily regret how the battle had gone. The past five days had been a complete slog, but he wasn't going to complain about what had essentially been a free, almost effortless victory. He and his host hadn't even been forced to reveal any of their trump cards, getting through the first round solely thanks to the Insomnia trait.

Fortunately, the female disciple hadn't had any noteworthy abilities outside of her irritating strategy of zoning her opponents out and waiting for them to grow tired. Not that she needed much else – Percy could absolutely see the pink mist knocking most of the other contestants out. Catching the woman was almost impossible while she hid within her domain, and her low mana expenditure allowed her to maintain her trap for a very long time.

Just… not long enough to take somebody like Percy down.

He wouldn't be surprised if even Violets had fallen prey to her tactics in the past. This was clearly how she'd earned her status as an elite disciple in the first place, as well as a ticket to the tournament.

‘Well, whatever…’ Percy muttered, watching her tail vanish behind the edge of the platform. ‘Let’s just grab our reward and chill until the next round.’

Kassorith gave a silent nod, descending slowly. As soon as he stepped on solid ground for the first time in days, he tossed his greatsword aside, letting it clatter to the floor unceremoniously. Traces of poisoned mist still lingered in the arena, a sluggish cloud that coiled near the ground like lazy smoke. Each breath brought a faint dizziness, but the substance was dissipating rapidly without its owner to replenish or hold it in place. The White announcer helped the process along, using his domain to fan the toxic fumes away, preparing the stage for the next pair of fighters.

The crowd erupted in cheers as Kassorith slithered out of the arena. There were fewer people in the stadium than there had been at the start of the tournament, and most of them had fallen asleep during the fight – many of them multiple times. The commotion quickly woke everyone up, however, causing them to join the celebration.

Percy didn’t blame them for getting so excited.

Granted, his host was just a newcomer to the tournament, so nobody had known him before the fight. The crowd would likely turn against him as early as during his next match – especially if he found himself fighting against one of the favourites. Still, today, he’d done everyone a great favour. His battle against the woman might have not been the most enjoyable, but he’d at least eliminated her early on in the competition, sparing the audience from wanting to gouge their eyeballs out once in each round of the event.

Even the organizers seemed to share that view. It was with great enthusiasm that a Violet Thess’kalan – a man with just a regular, untrimmed tunic – led Kassorith out of the stadium and down into one of the first caves lining the outer walls of the pillar-like structure. The place was dim and damp, filled with the steady, delicate sounds of dripping water. Droplets fell from jagged stalactites overhead, echoing softly as they struck shallow puddles of various shapes scattered across the uneven floor.

Despite its almost-primitive atmosphere, the place was anything but natural. Runes glowed along the walls in orderly lines – clear, deliberate signs of an advanced civilization, painting a stark contrast against the backdrop of moss-covered stone. The Broken Fang Sect had been like this too, though Percy hadn’t paid much attention at the time, thinking it had just been a peculiarity of that place.

‘I suppose their species like their environments dark and humid,’ he reasoned.

The Violet guide remained silent until they reached a wide intersection. The tunnel forked into three different paths, each marked by a glowing sign engraved into the floor. Beyond the arches, Percy could make out shelves carved directly into the cavern walls, each lined with countless colourful orbs that glowed softly.

“This is the treasury for the first round,” the guide explained, turning to face them at last. “Most of these rewards will remain available in future rounds – unless of course they are in limited supply and somebody claims them first. But more – and better – prizes will be added as you progress through the tournament.”

Kassorith flicked his tongue curiously. “So I can pick anything I want from this level?”

“Indeed,” the guide confirmed, handing over a bronze badge covered in runes. “Take your time. You may enter and leave the chambers freely. Placing your hand against the enchantments on the shelves will show you a detailed description of the items. When you’ve made your choice, press the badge to the runes instead to claim your prize. I’ll be outside.”

Without even waiting for a response, the man turned and slithered away, leaving them alone. Percy found it strange that the Violet hadn’t stuck around to supervise them.

‘Their enchantments are probably designed to prevent theft…’

Maybe Metatron’s spatial seal could bypass those protections – but Percy wasn’t going to count on that. He didn’t doubt that the Thess’kalans’ safeguards were mere toys before the titan’s skill, but Metatron hadn’t exactly poured much effort into crafting the artifact. And even if the seal could circumvent the enchantments, Percy wasn’t sure he wanted to test it. Stealing from people who’d done nothing wrong didn’t sit well with him – he generally tried to leave the places he visited better than he found them. At the same time, he wouldn’t rule out the possibility of snatching a treasure he liked, provided that he could leave something equally valuable in its place as compensation.

Still, he wasn’t in a hurry to try that. For now, he wanted to do things properly. The more battles he and Kassorith won, the more rewards he could claim legitimately. No sense in blowing the opportunity on a gamble.

‘Shall we?’ Kassorith asked, breaking Percy from his thoughts.

‘Go on. It’s your pick,’ Percy replied, already regretting offering his slimy host the first reward. With a sigh, he added, ‘Just do me a favour and go through everything first, yeah? I want to see what kind of stuff they’ve got.’

The Blue snorted in amusement. ‘I was going to do that anyway. Gawking at the prizes is half the fun.’

Not wasting another moment, Kassorith entered the left-most tunnel, labelled “Equipment”. He ignored the first few orbs, his gaze eventually lingering on one that shimmered in an indigo colour – clearly an indication that it was compatible with his lightning affinity. Following the guide’s instructions, the Thess’kalan placed his palm on the rune next to the glowing sphere, causing a foreign whisper – soft like a serpent’s hiss – to sound within their shared mind.

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Thunderbone Javelin

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A dozen questions surged through Percy’s mind as he listened to the item’s description. There was a lot to unpack, since this was his first time coming across an enchanted weapon designed for combat, aside from those he had personally crafted. But one important – if somewhat irrelevant – detail stood out.

‘Clear? Is that what the grade above White is called?’

Chapter 445 – Colour and Concept realms

Kassorith nodded. ‘“Demigod” and “ancestor” are unofficial terms. Once a mage reaches the Clear grade, their mana becomes pure enough that it’s almost transparent to a mortal’s Mana Sense. Only gods and demigods have senses sharp enough to spot it with ease. It’s also dense like a liquid even in its unmanifested state and can be stored for an extended period of time outside one’s body.’

Percy couldn't help but crease his brow. This sounded an awful lot like divine mana – the thick fluid he had absorbed during his evaluation in Phoebe's temple or the substance he received from the Vault every time he repaired the Moirais' Decree for one of his hosts.

'Does it become even denser after a demigod ascends to godhood?' he asked.

His host shook his head. 'Demigods wield the same grade of mana as gods – that's actually why they're called demigods in the first place. One of the primary goals during the entirety of the Colour realm is to gradually improve the grade of one's core all the way from Red to Clear, one step at a time – all in preparation for attaining divinity.'

'Colour realm? That's the official term for mortals, I take it?'

'Indeed. Once you become a god, you cross over to the Concept realm. Your power is no longer determined by the colour of your core, but by the number of concepts you have mastered. Ah, but don't let the fact that gods possess the same grade of mana as demigods fool you into thinking that the difference between the two realms is small – that couldn't be farther from the truth. A god's internal world contains dozens – if not hundreds – of times more mana than a mortal's core, and the way they wield it is fundamentally different. The gulf separating the two realms is generally considered as vast as that between three mortal grades.'

Percy swallowed hard. Leaving aside the other valuable information his host had shared, this was his first time hearing the gap between mortals and deities so clearly quantified. He'd always known that gods were far stronger, but the difference was even greater than he had imagined.

Three grades!

On Remior, the most talented mages struggled to fight a single grade above their own. Even on a greater spring like Thess'kala, that was the most one could hope to achieve. All who managed it were granted a distinct status and venerated as the pride of their world, participating in grand tournaments for all to watch and showered with priceless treasures year after year. Had somebody told them that Percy regularly fought and defeated multiple Blues as a mere Yellow, they would have lost their minds. Yet, even he didn't think he was ready to challenge Violets.

‘No wonder the ancestors don’t get a trim. No matter what they do, they’ll never compete against actual gods,’ he thought, recalling Kassorith’s earlier words.

It wasn’t that strange they spent most of their time in seclusion, trying to attain divinity, either. Percy could absolutely understand the temptation. After all, demigods were just a step away from their goal. It was a promotion that didn’t depend on centuries or millennia of guzzling down elixirs, but merely a realization – a singular obstacle standing between their, admittedly long, but still finite lives and true immortality. Becoming gods would grant them the greatest boost in power a living being could ever experience.

‘Yeah… I think I’d lose myself in training too if I was in their shoes…’

Alas, Percy was still a long way from having to worry about such things. Turning his attention back to the matter at hand, he realized his host had already moved past the bone javelin, examining other pieces of equipment of similar quality.

The enchanted weapons weren’t bad. Most of them could exhibit Violet-level strength if used the right way, while having been crafted out of merely Blue materials. Strictly speaking, this was a similar dynamic to what Percy did – he had forged everything out of Yellow mana but enchanted his weapons and armour to be on par with a Green’s constructs. The only reason he was able to use them to fight Blues was due to how easily he could duplicate and control them from afar, as well as the creative ways in which he wielded them.

‘The difference is that I do everything myself,’ he reminded himself. ‘These people need a demigod to elevate Blue materials to Violet-quality equipment.’

Even so, the right tools could still make a difference if Kassorith used them against elite disciples. They would be even more impactful for Percy who only fought regular Blues on Remior – assuming he found an artifact compatible with his affinity.

Sadly, Kassorith wasn’t allowed to use any of these things in the tournament – they were rewards he was expected to keep afterwards. Percy didn’t like depending on external items either. A powerful weapon might be able to help him right now, but it would turn into a useless lump of metal as soon as he advanced. He would much rather claim rewards that permanently increased his strength, even if their immediate impact was lower.

That said, the two still took their sweet time browsing through the shelves, examining anything that caught their eye. For Percy, it was a valuable opportunity to study the methods of actual demigods from a greater spring, giving him new ideas on how to improve his craft, or on what types of runes to purchase the next time he visited the Vault.

Even Kassorith seemed to enjoy this. This was obviously his first time participating in the tournament, so he'd likely never even seen so much quality equipment gathered in a single place.

It wasn't just weapons they found in the room. There was also a lot of protective gear, and even tools of convenience – like an enchanted flask that could produce drinking water while being fuelled by almost any common affinity – except fire. Its efficiency was terrible, but that didn't make it any less useful for a powerful mage who frequently travelled alone. They even saw a map of Thess'kala that could pinpoint and mark its own location in real time in the form of a blinking dot.

Percy found everything fascinating, but there were very few items that he was genuinely tempted to pick. Most notable was a pendant enchanted by an ancestor with a time affinity. Its effect was subtle and rather niche, yet it held a unique appeal for Percy. It could only be fuelled by certain mana types, but pure mana was luckily among them. While active, its enchantments slowed down the passage of time for its wearer by a modest ten percent, essentially giving it the opposite function to the Thirsty Valley or the Wiseman's Chamber.

That might not sound all that impressive – the effect was downright detrimental in many cases, since it would slow down the person's advancement speed and their ability to react to dangers in their surroundings. However, Percy knew it could be very useful for him, due to the way his clones worked. If he slowed his main body down for the rest of his life, his clones would effectively get a few extra centuries of travelling, allowing them to find more opportunities and treasures to bring back to Remior. It wasn't a lot, but those extra adventures could end up making the difference between Percy attaining godhood or dying of old age as a mortal.

'Sadly, I can't really use it right now…'

Percy was currently on the run – hunted by some of the most powerful noble Houses on Remior. He had to keep increasing his strength as quickly as possible, which was precisely why he'd chosen to sacrifice over a decade of opportunities to train inside Kronos's Decree. Besides, the pendant wouldn't even last very long. According to its description, it was only expected to remain functional for five to ten years, and Percy wouldn't have any way to repair or replace it without the correct materials or time mana.

With a heavy heart, he watched his host move to the next room. As interesting as the enchanted items were, it wasn't what they'd come here for. The second chamber was labelled "Property". Percy thought the category sounded a little odd, having no idea what to expect. Nevertheless, Kassorith entered the room enthusiastically – much more so than the last one. Not wasting any time, the Thess'kalan placed his palm on one of the enchantments, examining the first item on the shelf.

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Gissari Town

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'You can claim ownership of a whole town?! Just like that?!' Percy asked, dumbfounded.

'Of course. The people who enter this room are all elite disciples or grand elders. The whole planet essentially belongs to people like us. This is one of the best ways to find suitable servants or mating partners to build our dynasties with,' Kassorith replied with a shrug, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

'What about the people living there? Don't they get a say?' Percy asked again, his host's silence giving him his answer.

Seeing the Blue's nonchalance, Percy suddenly felt a lot better about the possibility of robbing this place clean. It appeared that Kassorith was far from the only scumbag on Thess'kala.

Sure, the way noble Houses on Remior governed over their provinces and towns wasn't all that different, but at least the commoners typically spent centuries under the same family's control – they weren't passed around from individual to individual on a whim, like commodities. When nobles invited Yellow-born commoners to their families, the latter were usually allowed to decline. It was an alluring offer for sure, but peasants were rarely forced into unwanted marriages. Evidently, Kassorith's people weren't as accommodating toward their weaker brethren.

‘Why would anyone even claim this crap from the treasury? Leaving the morality of it aside, wouldn’t they rather increase their own strength than waste their rewards on towns and servants?’ Percy asked again, the whole thing leaving a bad taste in his borrowed mouth.

‘Are you kidding? These are some of the most popular rewards,’ Kassorith replied with a chuckle. ‘Don’t forget that the tournaments take place every year. The participants don’t change nearly as frequently, so most of the elite disciples have many opportunities to pick what they want from the prize pool.’

As much as Percy hated to admit it, this made a lot of sense. Most of the other prizes were one-offs. Each Blue only needed a couple of rewards at most to permanently upgrade their affinities, and only a few pieces of equipment per decade. Even if most of them only won a single round every couple of years, they’d quickly amass all of those things. Other than limited-time opportunities – like the Ancestral Lineage Sect’s ritual that was being offered this year – there wasn’t much else for the most successful participants to spend their rewards on.

Even so, Percy didn’t approve. ‘Whatever… this is making my stomach churn. Just grab what you want from the last room and go.’

Chapter 446 – Affinity-changing treasures

The third and final room was by far the smallest, but also the most interesting. It was labelled “Personal Improvement” and it contained precisely the kinds of rewards Percy had come here for. There were only two shelves, the first one lined up with orbs of five different colours – treasures corresponding to the common affinities, no doubt. Their function was obvious, but Kassorith still placed his hand on one of the enchantments, the item’s description soon confirming Percy’s guess.

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Wick of the Waning Flame

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There wasn’t much there, but Percy still found the information fascinating. The artifact was similar to the Lotus of a Myriad Rivers in many ways – it could be used by multiple people and it only lasted for a short time. Eleven uses were much fewer than the ten thousand petals the Lotus had produced, yet it

seemed that the Wick could survive a bit longer. At the same time, most of its lifespan had been exhausted already, so whoever claimed it from the treasury would have to consume it promptly.

'If it's anything like the Lotus, I guess it's impossible to slow its decay down…'

Percy still had several questions. For one, this item wasn't a plant like the Lotus, making him wonder what the connection between the two treasures was. Even if they had both been plants, that wouldn't explain how they worked – not when most plants in the universe were simple living organisms stuck at Orange or lower, without properties even remotely this interesting.

'Where do these artifacts come from?' he couldn't help but ask.

'Most commonly, from the remains of dead gods,' Kassorith replied in an even tone – making it seem as if he was discussing something as mundane as the weather, rather than sharing high-level secrets.

Percy wasn't nearly as calm, on the other hand, his host's words throwing his wisp in turmoil. Probably sensing his surprise, the Thess'kalan continued with a smile.

'When a deity dies, their internal world collapses, creating a large concentration of divine mana mixed with potent willpower and concepts that have nowhere to go. It doesn't always give rise to artifacts like this Wick, but the likelihood goes up the more powerful the god was, and the more concepts they had mastered.'

A greater spring like Thess'kala probably got involved in lots of interplanetary conflicts, so it wasn't that strange that their gods looted affinity-changing treasures from their fallen opponents so often.

Thinking about it, Percy realized that it was precisely this phenomenon that Svarog must've based his Decree on, to create the Rings of Sacrilege. Somehow, the mad titan had found a way to preserve not just the basic concepts that could grant one a certain affinity, but even the more obscure ones that mortals could normally only inherit as blessings from their divine parents.

Svarog's infamous ring mould had probably fashioned those concepts into objects that lasted forever and could be used by an infinite number of people. In other words, his creations had exceeded what the

regular affinity-changing treasures were capable of in every conceivable way – no wonder they had sparked one of the greatest wars in the history of the universe.

'What about the rare affinities?' Percy asked, latching onto something. 'You said those are very difficult to find.'

Kassorith shrugged. 'Even if we ignore the fact that less than one percent of the population – and therefore gods – have a rare affinity, the corresponding treasures have more trouble forming, since the mana types don't resonate with the world as easily.'

Percy nodded, thinking back to his home world. Remior was rather lucky in the sense that they had produced a whopping three titans with rare affinities while having only given rise to a hundred or so gods in total. Perhaps it wasn't that strange that mages with rare affinities were better positioned to attain divinity or invent a Decree, but Percy still felt that his planet was an outlier in that regard.

That said, even if somebody was to slaughter every god on Remior, there was no guarantee they would obtain a single artifact capable of granting a rare affinity. Even if they did, it might only be useable for a few days and by a handful of people. If that wasn't problematic enough, only those with pure affinities would even be eligible to use it.

If Percy wanted a life affinity for his second core, he would have to hunt down multiple powerful gods who possessed that affinity – and hope for the best. Even for peak worlds, this wasn't an easy thing to do. It was debatable whether it was even worth it – just to strengthen a bunch of mortals.

Something still didn't add up though. Based on what Hermes had said during his original transmission, the Divine Order had been well aware of how the Lotus worked even before they planted the seed, meaning that it hadn't been the first of its kind.

'These resources… Do they come in standard forms?' Percy asked.

Kassorith creased his brow. 'Oh? This isn't your first time encountering one, is it? Did your backwater planet get lucky in the past?'

Percy didn't respond, not wanting to clue his host in about the Lotus. If it was indeed as rare as Percy thought it was, it might not be difficult for the Thess'kalans to pinpoint which lesser spring had obtained one recently – thus linking Percy to Remior.

Seeing him refuse to answer, the Blue shrugged. 'They do. Divine mana tends to coalesce in very specific ways – usually determined by the exact combination of concepts involved. Sometimes, it produces a plant. Other times, it's a mineral or an inanimate object. Hell, even small critters have been reported in the past. Wicks of the Waning Flame usually come from mid-tier gods with fire affinities. If you want one that lasts longer or works on more people, you'll typically need to kill a stronger god. If you want both, then it takes someone even more powerful than that. Even treasures without a time limit exist, but they can still only be used by a finite number of people. Those are obviously more precious, since they can be stored in a warehouse for years. The most powerful sects keep some of those in their vaults to reward their most talented disciples with – in case they can't get the right limited-time treasure when they need it. I imagine a few might be offered during the later rounds of the tournament.'

'What about treasures that grant a composite affinity directly?'

'Well, they exist. They are rarer than common affinities and more common than rare affinities… But they're kinda useless. The only advantage is that they can grant somebody with a pure affinity a composite one directly – so they only need to consume one resource instead of two. Other than that, they just limit one's options, since they can't be used by somebody with an unrelated common affinity.'

Percy sighed, realizing the resources currently available to them weren't very useful for him. In theory, the time limit didn't matter much if he used the treasure immediately. Sadly, his main body was currently hiding on the uninhabited side of Remior, so he couldn't return to Twilight City or the Camelot province in the near future. Hell, eight days were probably not even enough for him to get through the tournament or return to his main body, let alone bring the treasure to Nesha or Elaine.

If he wanted to spend one of his rewards on the girls, his best bet would be to wait for one that lasted for several months at the very least. In fact, he still didn't know what the wasp familiar's second affinity would be, so it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a treasure at hand just in case.

The exact affinity was also something to consider. Water would be useless for Elaine and Nesha didn't need earth. That only left fire, air or lightning. Of the three, lightning was probably the best for his girlfriend, as metal mana was more suitable for runecrafting than lava or dust. It would also give Elaine the same acid affinity as Galahad, so the two could practice together.

‘These are some high requirements though. A lightning resource that will last for a minimum of six months and has at least three uses left…’

Even then, there was a risk it would be useless for the wasp if it awakened a lightning affinity on its own, but that was outside Percy’s control. Regardless, he had to win his way through the tournament and hope they offered what he wanted by the finals, otherwise he’d have to make some concessions.

Strictly speaking, it was in Remior’s best interest for him to pick a treasure that could be used by the greatest number of people – instead of only thinking about himself and his friends. However, Percy wasn’t currently in a position to worry about that. The last thing he needed was to give everyone another reason to hunt him down, or to cause another round of fighting between the noble families.

‘They made their bed when they put a bounty on my head… If they want a fancy composite affinity, it’ll have to wait until this whole mess is over.’

Oblivious to his thoughts, Kassorith shifted his gaze to the bottom shelf – the one that contained the items they had come here for. There were only two types of glowing orbs on this shelf, housing the secondary ingredients meant for the optional modifications of the ritual. The Thess’kalan picked an orb that shone in a deep shade of sickly green. He was clearly looking forward to enhancing the potency of his venom more than he cared about sharpening his thermal sense. It wasn’t what Percy would have prioritized, but he knew this wasn’t his choice.

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Conflux of a Thousand Toxins

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The thought of exposing his body to a concoction this dangerous caused Percy to shudder. Especially since he still didn’t know whether the ritual would work for him.

‘If I do go through with this, I have to make sure I have lots of Yellow or even Green healing potions ready, just in case…’

Kassorith didn't share his concerns, however. He pressed the bronze badge against the enchantment, watching the glowing orb shatter into countless tiny motes of light, a small gemstone vial floating into his hand. Unfortunately, his spatial pin had been confiscated before the start of the tournament, so Kassorith would have to ask for permission to store his reward there until the conclusion of the event.

'I can keep it for you if you want,' Percy offered with a mental smirk.

'Fuck off,' Kassorith spat. 'I'd rather trust a hasslath.'

'Hey, you are the one who tried to kick me out of your body before upholding your end of the bargain – not me,' Percy reminded his host. 'Your soul injuries are still stitched up, aren't they?'

'We both know why you're keeping me alive. But if I give you that vial, something tells me I'll never see it again,' the Blue replied with a scoff.

'Suit yourself. I hope you don't forget that next round is my pick though. Or we'll have a problem.'

The two then left the dark cave, looking forward to their next opponent.

Overall, Percy was happy with the rewards on offer. Granted, most of them weren't directly useful for him at the moment – for one reason or another – which was admittedly a little disappointing, considering that this was a greater spring.

Still, between the three ingredients for the ritual and the affinity-changing treasure he hoped to find, there was plenty to get him excited. And that was without including the valuable core cleansing technique his host had already taught him, the rare opportunity to face off against eight elite disciples, the valuable information Kassorith had shared about gods and demigods, and, most importantly, the main thing he had come to Thess'kala for – the life-extending leaf Syrreneth had promised him.

'Only three more battles to earn it…'

Chapter 447 – Second round

Percy and Kassorith found the guide waiting for them by the cave's entrance – right where he'd said he'd be. The Violet looked mildly displeased, probably because they'd taken their sweet time in the treasury. In their defence, he had told them to stay as long as they wanted – though he probably hadn't expected them to examine nearly every orb on the shelves.

'Well… it's our first time here. Excuse us for being curious,' Percy thought with a mental shrug, not feeling even a hint of regret.

Either way, the guide said nothing, merely leading them to a cavern on the side of the pillar – this one only containing a small room with a single bed. Normally, the second round of the tournament was supposed to commence the moment the first ended. Contestants weren't meant to rest until the third or fourth round. However, the organizers had decided to make an exception, giving Kassorith a few extra hours to recover, in consideration of the fact that his previous fight had lasted nearly a week. The spectators and the other participants wouldn't be thrilled to wait even longer, but it was only fair.

Of course, Percy and his host didn't actually need to sleep – but they still pretended to, closing their eyes and relaxing their minds. It was tempting to dwell on the sweet rewards still waiting for them in the treasury, or the powerful opponents ahead, but Percy tried to shut it all out.

'Letting my excitement sabotage everything would be idiotic…'

In the end, the break felt far too short. The guide "woke" them after what Percy could've sworn were only a few minutes. Returning to the arena, he quickly noticed that only about half the competitors remained – which was only to be expected now that the first round of the tournament was over. However, he also recognized all the same faces as before, meaning that the organizers hadn't shuffled the participants between blocks yet.

'I guess we'll have to eliminate most of the people in the neighbouring brackets first, before they bring the winners together for the finals…'

Percy didn't know how many elite disciples had registered for this regional tournament in total, but he doubted it was exactly two hundred and fifty-six. That meant some would either need to fight an extra round, or skip one altogether.

Both scenarios were acceptable.

An extra match made winning harder, but likely came with another reward from the treasury. At least, Percy hoped the Thess'kalans were sensible – and generous – enough to structure the event like that. Regardless, Kassorith wasn't in either such group. According to what they'd been told during the sign-up, they'donly have to go through eight rounds in total – seven of them left.

Realizing that everyone had been waiting for them, Percy cast the pointless thoughts aside, slithering to the centre of the arena along with his host. There, they came face-to-face with a burly man Percy recognized – the lava user who'd fought right before them in the previous round.

In hindsight, Percy regretted not paying more attention to that fight.

'At least we know his affinity,' he told his host with a mental sigh, Kassorith echoing the sentiment.

The White announcer didn't waste time declaring the start of the battle.

Kassorith manifested a hastily-forged greatsword, taking to the air. Their opponent had already started launching balls of molten stone, twice the size of watermelons. The glowing liquid that splashed from every missed hit quickly began pooling at the floor of the arena. Percy had to admit that the constructs had looked slower and clumsier from the outside. It was a different story entirely once he found himself on the receiving end. The scorching spheres flew deceptively fast given their density, and the lava user controlled their paths with a precision no earth mage should have been capable of.

Luckily, Kassorith wasn't a slouch.

Percy had trained alongside his host many times, but this was his first time seeing him pushed to his limits. The Blue was more agile atop his metallic weapon than even the air mage Percy and Micky had faced after leaving the Valley – one of the fastest opponents they'd ever dealt with. The thick walls of domain-infused steel Kassorith manifested on a whim were also much harder to pierce than the defences of the earth mage who had forced Percy to develop his Second Parade. Kassorith was able to shift between offense and defence with greater ease than the water mage had.

Overall, Percy could say with confidence that none of the dozens of Blues he had slain on Remior would have been a match for Kassorith. He and Micky could currently take on three of them at a time – but even so, he wasn't confident they would win against the Thess'kalan.

Sadly, that alone wasn't enough to make Kassorith into an elite disciple – a title that their opponent absolutely deserved.

The lava mage fought aggressively, trying to drive them to a corner with precise, coordinated formations of liquid meteors. The extreme heat softened Kassorith's metallic shields, the first strike leaving a deep dent in each one, the follow-ups almost always ripping them apart like paper.

Kassorith was allowed to fly outside the arena as long as he didn't land elsewhere – but so was his opponent. Riding a relatively cold slab of stone atop a rolling carpet of magma, the burly mage pursued them across the sea of clouds and mist surrounding the stadium. Runic formations hovered nearby, likely transmitting the fight to the spectators.

The lava mage was gaining ground – or rather, air. And a difference in mana reserves that kept growing with every spell the two sides cast. Kassorith was struggling to keep up with a true Violet-level opponent on his own – the burly man being nothing like that one-trick pony of a woman that they'd eliminated before.

'Help me! I can't win this by myself!'

Percy sighed. This wasn't ideal, even though they had expected it. Left with no other choice, he tried to pitch in in subtle ways, trying not to reveal Kassorith's secret advantages so early. Using his Instantaneous Imprint spell, he engraved runes onto his host's constructs, but did so by allowing his willpower to sink deep beneath the surface of the metal, thus hiding the symbols from plain view. It made it impossible for an outsider to pry into what he was doing, but Percy's clever trick wasn't without its cost.

The extra hoops he had to go through severely impacted the quality of his enchantments.

Percy only managed to plant a few hardness and force absorption runes into the shields, allowing them to last a little longer. Equipping the swords with some sharpness and lightness runes gave Kassorith a chance to launch a better counterattack, finally putting some pressure onto his opponent. Whenever his host was about to get hit, Percy even coated their body with an additional layer of willpower, easing the mental strain.

There was only so much he could do without revealing their unusual advantages, but his contribution seemed to tilt the scales slightly. Before long, Kassorith stopped getting pushed back, placing the lava user on the defensive.

'Try to keep a few good swords on the side. I'll help you prepare the finisher,' Percy advised.

It wasn't going to be easy – because the two Blues were almost evenly matched, even with Percy's thumb on the scale. Still, Percy took control of some swords and had them float behind his host, slowly covering their interiors with more complex runes. Enchanting the constructs with the full unit cell that he intended to use later on in the tournament was out of the question. He didn't think he could insert too many of his runes inside the swords without compromising their structural integrity either.

But he did what he could.

'Now! Go for it!' he exclaimed as soon as he felt they were ready.

Kassorith didn't hesitate. They might not always see eye-to-eye, but the Thess'kalan probably trusted the potency of Percy's runes, having seen what they could do during their training. The Blue added a few unruned stone swords into his formation – mostly to get rid of the excess earth mana in his body – before coating the rest in a torrent of lightning mana. Indigo bolts danced across the metal blades, turning them red-hot, then white.

With little warning, he hurled everything at the lava mage – who clearly didn't expect such a bold all-out attack. That said, the burly man maintained his composure, grinning at what he clearly thought was a dumb move. Emptying over two thirds of his reserves, the lava mage shrouded himself in a thick sphere of liquid rock, likely confident it would block the spell and leave Kassorith vulnerable afterwards.

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have been wrong. Earth mana – and all its permutations – was excellent for defence. A Blue's all-out attack would usually lose to an equally powerful barrier cast by an earth user. Unless, of course, the attacker wielded some extremely lethal rare affinity like space or soul.

Sadly for the burly man, there was nothing normal about his circumstances.

Even leaving aside the fact that Kassorith specialized in offense, his attacks packed more of a punch than usual right now. The enchanted swords reached the magma sphere in a flash due to their reduced weight, their edges screaming through the air like solid bolts of lightning. Their sharpened tips pierced through the liquid shell like hot knives through even-hotter butter, the extreme heat threatening to melt them mid-flight. But many of them survived – thanks in no small part to Percy's hardness runes.

Kassorith and Percy held their shared breath, the result not immediately clear. Soon, the sphere began to dissolve, revealing their opponent. Most of the swords had been destroyed halfway through, several tons of liquid steel having been swept away by the flowing lava.

Still…

A few patches of rapidly-cooling metal clung to the man's scales like silver flowers in full bloom. The man winced as some of the heat seeped through, but the constructs hadn't pierced his skin, nor had they scorched his flesh. Colourful runes covered him from head to tail, protecting him. These weren't from the Vault of Magic – nor had they been drawn by Percy. They had been written in the Thess'kalan runecrafting language, and the thick, potent mana coursing through them clearly hadn't been produced by a Blue.

Or a Violet.

Or a White.

Or even a demigod.

They had come from the stadium itself – the handiwork of a god – saving the contestant from certain death.

Kassorith's second match was over.

They had won.

Chapter 448 – Third round

Percy and Kassorith didn't spend too long in the treasury after their second victory. In fact, they didn't even bother to check the new additions in the "Equipment" and "Property" chambers, heading straight to the small room labelled "Personal Improvement".

A few new affinity-changing treasures with longer durations and higher quotas had been added to the top shelf, but still nothing Percy would even consider bringing home. Taking over his host's body, he placed Kassorith's palm on an enchantment in front of one of the light-blue spheres glowing on the bottom shelf, next to the sickly green type that they had claimed before.

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Abyssal Moss

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And there it was – the first of the three ingredients Percy wanted to claim above everything else from the prize pool. If he and his host failed to win enough battles, he could do without the toxins, but the Abyssal Moss in particular was something he had a use for.

Outside of strengthening his body through the ritual – to hopefully improve his ability to withstand his boosting art and the trollsfury tattoos – Percy figured that raising his resistance to cold would serve him well if he could get it. He might not have a Thess'kalan's thermal sense, but the modification might allow him to better endure Micky's soul-freezing mana, possibly letting him use his Soul-crushing Needle more easily. Even an extra cast per battle could make a huge difference, given how powerful the Masterful Secret Art was.

'A spatial device hidden in your soul?' Kassorith asked as soon as Percy stored the vial containing the pale, snow-like moss into his seal.

Percy hadn't shown the artifact to his host before – though he had hinted at its existence. Revealing the seal was sadly unavoidable, since Percy would need to store multiple items by the end of this trip.

'Not a device. It's actually part of my bloodline,' he lied through their curved fangs.

Percy had no idea if his host bought his bullshit, but thankfully, Kassorith didn't press for more answers. Either way, the Blue had no way to examine the artifact directly. Even if he did, he had already failed to recognize the Vault's magiscript before, so Percy didn't think his involvement with Metatron was close to being exposed – not unless he was forced to use the titan's Decree in the middle of the arena, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Back in the stadium, they had to wait for a match to finish before it was their turn again. Their third opponent was another female Thess'kalan – one that Kassorith found slightly more attractive than the last one, judging by the more frequent flickers of his forked tongue and his elevated heartrate. Personally, Percy struggled to even tell the two women apart. Either way, he wanted to believe that Kassorith was serious and experienced enough not to let something this stupid interfere with his ability to fight.

Luckily, that didn't happen, but that didn't make the battle any easier. In fact, it was their toughest one yet – and not by a small margin.

To nobody's surprise, the woman possessed a composite affinity, like most of the elite disciples in the tournament. This time, it was sound – the fusion of lightning and air. It was a mana type Percy had faced before, but not in a very long time. The mana blended seamlessly with the woman's domain, some of it penetrating Kassorith's. A deafening buzz filled the arena from the very start, rupturing Kassorith's eardrums within seconds, sticky trickles of blood warming both his hood and the sides of his neck.

The insidious domain was more annoying than downright crippling. Still, it was much harder to block than even their first opponent's poisoned steam, forcing them to suffer its effect throughout the battle. If that wasn't enough, it seemed to accelerate the woman's already rapid attacks – a relentless barrage of concussive blasts constantly raining down on Kassorith with crushing force.

He dodged many of them, but most connected. Even his steel mana failed to stop them completely, the powerful shockwaves penetrating the metallic coating with ease. Luckily, the individual strikes didn't cause much damage, but Percy and his host quickly realized that they wouldn't last a minute unless they adapted.

With a heavy heart, Percy was forced to finally reveal his domain.

He knew that a few hidden runes and the occasional subtle injection of willpower wouldn't do this time. Unless he joined the fight properly, they wouldn't even be able to defend against the blasts. Of course, if it was just that, the crowd might misinterpret the nature of his contribution. Simply layering his

willpower on top of Kassorith's could be attributed to him possessing a stronger domain than he had initially let on.

Unfortunately, Percy had to get more involved than that. They had to diversify their efforts – one focusing on defence while the other infused his domain into their attacks. Inevitably, both the spectators and their future opponents would learn that Kassorith possessed two separate domains that could be used concurrently and independently of one another.

'At least I doubt anyone will suspect you have an alien soul sharing your body,' Percy muttered, mostly to console himself than his host.

The good news was that their sacrifice yielded some immediate results. The woman was still nearly impossible to pin down, but Percy's domain massively reduced the damage he and his host took. At the same time, Kassorith was able to focus his willpower on the swords, letting them fly faster and pose a far greater threat to their opponent, while consuming only a fraction of the mana.

Even so, the battle was gruelling. The woman was impossibly fast, dodging nearly everything, while continuing to land her own blows. Despite Percy's efforts, he was horrified to watch his host's body gradually turn into a bloody mess – shattered scales, rattled organs and mounted internal damage.

'Please, don't let the stadium's enchantments activate…' he prayed silently to no gods in particular.

Healing their body after the fight would be trivial, thanks to Kassorith's bloodline. But that would only be acceptable if the enchantments didn't swoop in to disqualify them before then. Sadly, their opponent wasn't making things easy. It soon became clear that the woman had more than just her composite affinity to rely on. Watching the ambient mana flood her core, Percy creased his brow, initially thinking that their opponent possessed a boosting art similar to his own. Upon further examination, he realized that the effect wasn't the result of controlled, deliberate efforts, but rather something that she did passively.

'A bloodline…'

Unlike Kassorith's, this one could be used in combat. Thankfully, the effect seemed rather minor – weaker than even Circulation, let alone the full Dance. Still, it needlessly prolonged the fight, making

Percy and Kassorith's efforts to whittle down the woman's reserves even more agonizing than they should have been.

In the end, the battle didn't last nearly as long as their first, but it was still the second longest of this tournament block so far. It wasn't until several hours later that the sound mage finally conceded – Percy's domain doing more to preserve his host's mana than the bloodline did for the woman.

The other contestants – the few remaining at least – didn't seem happy that they'd been forced to wait again, but the crowd didn't mind this time, having clearly found the fight exciting enough. Three victories were more than enough to raise Kassorith's status in the audience's eyes – especially since there weren't that many elite disciples left in this block for the crowd to root for.

But Percy didn't care much about his host's reputation. It was finally time to claim their first portion of the ritual's primary ingredient – and to figure out what to do with it. He hoped that Kassorith would be open to going through the incomplete ritual right away, to boost their strength as much as possible for the battles ahead. They'd already revealed their second domain, so they were running out of trump cards fast. The only thing left unused was the full extent of Percy's magiscript.

'I'm not sure that's enough to get us through another five rounds…' he thought grimly.

Chapter 449 – Plasma

'Like I said, if you want me to go through the ritual early, you'd better lend me the moss you claimed,' Kassorith said with a smirk.

Percy suppressed the urge to curse the greedy Thess'kalan.

In theory, his host's demand wasn't all that unreasonable. Percy's reward would be useless until they won the fourth round and earned his own portion of the primary ingredient anyway. Their best bet – as a team – would be to raise Kassorith's strength as much as possible, to increase their odds of making it deeper into the tournament.

Not that the Greater Thess'kalan Physique would have that big of an impact on them. Kassorith had no access to the Carnival or the Soul-crushing Needle, so the ritual's effects would be subtle. Still, sharpening his thermal sense might help, as would strengthening his body – enough to endure more punishment without yielding – especially if their last fight was anything to go by.

Luckily, the arena's enchantments had done a great job assessing the severity of Kassorith's wounds this time, not activating to protect him before necessary. Percy suspected that the organizers had tweaked the mechanism slightly to account for his host's life-saving bloodline – which he had disclosed when signing up for the tournament. That said, Percy would feel a lot better about his odds in a tougher vessel.

Sadly, there was a problem with giving the Abyssal Moss to his host.

Percy couldn't trust the Thess'kalan farther than he could throw him. If Kassorith amassed all the ingredients for the ritual this early, he might stop trying to get through the tournament. Five more rounds might be too much effort for just a single additional reward. Even if he kept trying, there was a chance they would get eliminated early regardless, costing Percy everything.

In the end, it appeared that he was overthinking the situation, however.

The guide informed them that there wouldn't be a break until after the fourth round, so there wasn't enough time for them to go through the ritual anyway right now. If Percy wanted both the primary ingredient and the life-extending leaf that Syrreneth had promised him, he had no choice but to make it through at least one more round relying solely on their current means.

'For your sake, I hope you don't quit on me before this is over,' Percy warned the Blue.

'Sure, sure…' Kassorith shrugged. 'You don't need to threaten me. It's true I've already gained most of the good things, but who would say no to more? Besides, it's not like your leaf is coming out of my pocket. I couldn't care less about whatever deal you've struck with my master.'

Neither of them said anything else as Kassorith claimed his prize from the "Personal Improvement" chamber and listened to its description one last time.

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Greater Thess'kalan Heartblood

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The instructions were simple enough, the bloodline of the dead ancestor likely doing all the heavy lifting in this inheritance. Percy wasn't sure how long Thess'kalan days were exactly, but they felt slightly shorter than those on Remior, so it would probably be fine if he spent a couple of days and nights in the bath back home.

He was tempted to snatch the gemstone vial from Kassorith. It would only take a thought to store the Heartblood in his seal and leave Thess'kala – his host wouldn't be able to stop him. Even without the toxins, Percy might be able to get most of the benefits from the ritual. However, he wasn't in a rush to cut all ties with the slimy Blue.

'Enjoy your reward,' he muttered with a forced smile. 'For now,' he added, though he kept that part to himself.

Before leaving the treasury, Kassorith took his trimmed tunic off, activating his bloodline. The change in perspective was disorienting, and the experience of crawling through their own throat as their old body crumbled and rotted rapidly around them was even more disturbing now that Percy knew what was happening.

Still, the relief that discarding their injured flesh brought them made the discomfort worthwhile.

Kassorith didn't have any corpses other than his own to consume this time, so their new body only grew to the size of an adolescent before running out of nutrients. They were still missing a few centimetres of height and several kilograms of bone and muscle compared to an adult Thess'kalan, which wasn't ideal. But it was better than starting their next match all battered up. If they made it through the fourth round, they could find something to eat during the intermission.

Returning to the arena, they found their opponent waiting for them.

There were only four participants left in this block, including Kassorith. And only two would move on to the next round. Percy guessed the same would happen in the remaining seven blocks – a total of sixteen contestants getting reshuffled for the second phase of the regional tournament.

Either way, they had to win first, before they worried about what came next.

Percy recognized their current opponent – a toned but lean, male Thess'kalan. He was the same man who had stood on the sidelines unfazed during most of the previous battles, not even bothering to protect himself from any stray projectiles the participants had fired.

All the other contestants had shielded themselves with all sorts of barriers of mana or willpower. But not him – he had somehow felt at ease, seemingly knowing that he hadn't been in any danger even as blobs of magma and frozen javelins had whizzed mere centimetres from his face.

'His affinity was pretty troublesome too if I'm not mistaken. What was it again? Fire, with a weird blessing?' Percy asked.

Kassorith shook his head.

'It's a plasma affinity, not a blessing,' the Blue explained.

Percy nodded in understanding. He'd heard of it, but he'd never seen it before this tournament. Connecting the few glimpses of the man's spells with information that he had heard in the past, he reminded himself that the purple plumes of plasma were supposedly hotter than regular flames, while travelling faster than lightning bolts. Of all the composite affinities, plasma was widely regarded as the one with the greatest offensive power – more destructive than even light, though not quite as fast.

'Why couldn't they have matched us with either of the other two?' Kassorith wondered, clicking his tongue.

Based on what they'd seen so far – and on the crowd's enthusiastic reaction – the plasma mage was not only the strongest participant from their block, but likely one of the favourites for the entire tournament. It wouldn't be surprising if he made the top four – or even the finals.

'It doesn't matter,' Percy said with a shrug. 'We're here to win the whole thing, remember? We'd have to face him – or somebody even stronger – sooner or later anyway.'

Of course, beneath his outer nonchalance, Percy also felt a pang of anxiety over the challenging battle that loomed ahead. Even so, he stood by his words.

Kassorith sighed. ‘Alright. What’s the plan?’

‘Let’s focus on defence for now. We’ll have both domains protecting our body at all times – along with as much mana as we deem necessary. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not let any of this guy’s attacks touch us like the sound user’s did, and I’m not sure we’ll be able to dodge them all.’

‘Not saying you’re wrong, but we won’t be able to exhaust his reserves like that,’ Kassorith pointed out.

Outlasting their opponent would inevitably require some back and forth. If the plasma mage was the only one attacking, he could easily slow down his assault whenever his core was about to dry up. The only way for Percy and Kassorith to win would be to put some pressure on their opponent by counterattacking, which would sadly expose them to the man’s deadly affinity.

‘It’s not a permanent solution. No matter how good he is, he’s still a Blue like us. Once we figure him out, our second domain should allow us to outlast him. But we need to understand how his other trick works too, before committing to an attack – otherwise we’ll just be wasting mana.’

Percy would have loved another minute or two to discuss strategy with his host, and he didn’t doubt that Kassorith felt the same way. Alas, the time for talking was over, the White announcer’s booming voice cutting it short.

“Let the first match of the fourth round… begin!”

Chapter 450 – Fourth round

Focusing on defence had been the right call.

The plasma mage had barely given Percy and Kassorith a chance to get off the ground and wrap themselves in a thick roll of steel before he began firing devastating projectiles by the dozens. Each

purple orb hovered beside them for the briefest of instants – for reasons that Percy had yet to figure out – before slamming violently into their barrier from all sorts of insidious angles.

The scorching flares deformed the shield on impact much like the lava user's attacks had – but the plasma projectiles were even faster and more numerous. At least, the ravaged metal blocked most of the force behind each blast, but couldn't do much against the heat, which penetrated just as easily as the sound mage's concussive blows. If it hadn't been for the two domains coating Kassorith's body, they would have likely been disqualified already.

'How the hell is he doing this while spending the same amount of mana as us?!' Kassorith demanded, frustration evident in his voice.

'Skill? A stronger domain than either of our own? A good affinity matchup? All of the above?' Percy offered, though he wasn't feeling much better about it than his host. 'Try to gain some distance. Maybe fleeing will cost us less mana than blocking.'

The situation wasn't sustainable, but Percy wanted to understand something that had been bothering him for a while, before settling on a concrete plan. They could probably win this if he spared some of his willpower to draw some runes on their shield, thus lessening the strain on their reserves, yet he had a hunch that there was a better path to victory in this particular battle – one that didn't involve revealing their final trump card in the preliminaries. Not that their opponent was weak – far from it – but something about the way he fought rubbed Percy in a peculiar way.

Following his suggestion, Kassorith shot out of the arena atop his greatsword, plasma flares continuing to rain on him almost without pause. The attacks only slowed down slightly as Kassorith gained altitude, but the plasma mage was hot on their tail, propelled by two steady jets of purple mana shooting from his palms. The man quickly regained his bearings and resumed his relentless onslaught as they all dove into the dome of mist and clouds above the pillar, normally held at bay by the stadium's enchantments.

Percy furrowed his host's brow, thinking there had been something off with the brief exchange.

'Why did his attacks slow down for a while?'

The plasma mage's accuracy was way higher than it should have been – considering how quickly and erratically both he and Kassorith were moving. But it had suffered for some reason, until they reached the clouds.

Strictly speaking, Kassorith was probably the weakest contestant in the entire tournament without Percy's help, but he was still far stronger than a regular Blue, and his skillset was quite balanced – his flying speed included. Their opponent shouldn't be having such an easy time landing over ninety percent of his shots as they both zigzagged through the fog-obscured air. Something else was going on. It was almost as if the man could tell where they would move a second before they did it.

'Does he have a bloodline similar to my Greater Foresight spell? Is that how he knew whenever he was safe from those stray projectiles during the other fights?'

The realization caused a faint smile to creep up the corners of Percy's borrowed lips.

'Why are you smirking like an idiot?!' Kassorith snapped, pressing Percy impatiently. 'Please tell me you've figured something out!'

'I'm working on it,' Percy responded, rolling their eyes. 'Just give me some time.'

'Well, hurry the fuck up! Our mana is already down by a fifth, and I can't even spare a moment to check how much he has! But I bet it's more than us!'

The urgency of the situation helped suppress Percy's bubbling enthusiasm. As confident as he was in his assessment, figuring out their opponent's bloodline was only half the battle. Finding a way to deal with it was no less important. Normally, a predictive skill like this would have been extremely difficult to beat – all of the powerful mages Percy had slain over the years would readily attest to that. However, Percy wasn't as worried as somebody else in his shoes would – or should – have been, because he was in a unique position to crack the man's ability.

Percy knew that perfectly predicting the future was impossible.

It fluctuated too much, even projections of the very next moment potentially shifting several times before they became reality – depending on all sorts of minor decisions and variables that constantly

changed during a heated battle. The best that people like him and his current opponent could do, was to take their best guess, based on whatever information they had available. The deeper into the future they attempted to pry, and the less data they had access to, the blurrier that guess was bound to be.

'So, I just need to figure out what information he is basing his predictions off, and tamper with it,' Percy concluded. 'It has to be more than just his regular senses, doesn't it?'

The thermal vision the Thess'kalans possessed was fancy but entirely useless in a high-level battle like this – especially one involving fire- and lightning-based composite affinities. Kassorith's forked tongue couldn't sense anything past the superheated barrier of molten steel protecting them, and Percy doubted their opponent was having an easier time. Even if it hadn't been for the metal, the extreme temperature of the air in their surroundings had definitely cloaked their negligible body heat.

Mana Sense wouldn't help the plasma user much either, because the thick wall of steel – dense in Blue mana as it was – should have obscured Kassorith's internal flow as well. Soul Vision was also out of the question, as their opponent didn't have the right affinity for it.

That only left the mundane senses – just sight and hearing, really, from that distance. Maybe even a way to sense the flow of willpower. Percy wouldn't count on the plasma mage being able to do that, but he included the possibility just to be thorough – since their opponent was an experienced Blue who had probably spent centuries fighting with and against domains.

Still…

'It's not enough information. If it was me, I wouldn't have been able to tell a thing in this situation.'

And yet, there was no doubt that the plasma mage was predicting their moves. This only left one explanation. The man's bloodline didn't just allow him to compile all this information into a projection of the future – it also granted him an additional sense. One that neither Percy nor anybody else possessed – an extra source of data to rely on. All Percy had to do, was to find out what this sense was, and to figure out a way to inhibit it. That ought to make their opponent a lot weaker, instantly tilting the scales to their favour.

'But what is it?'

Thinking back to the start of the battle, the only time the plasma user's attacks had slowed was during their initial climb out of the stadium. What if it wasn't just the brief adjustment period that had made the man's life harder, but something about the environment?

Percy mentally shook his head.

'That doesn't make any sense. It was just empty air – the same as here. If anything, it was even cleaner inside the dome, since it wasn't shrouded in mist. Shouldn't that have made it easier for him to collect whatever information he needs?'

Or maybe not. Perhaps, the clouds actually helped more than they hurt. Then again, the man's predictive ability had worked just as well by the floor of the arena, and there weren't any clouds there.

What did the ground have in common with the clouds?

A powerful impact – slightly stronger than the rest – shook the melting barrier, breaking Percy out of his thoughts. The shockwave rattled his host's bones, the twin domains struggling to fend off the scorching heat. For a moment, Percy almost regretted not donating the ingredients for Kassorith to undergo the ritual – the Greater Thess'kalan Physique would have made the heat easier to endure.

Then, he remembered that they hadn't had enough time to take the bath anyway.

'Stop spacing out! It's barely been a hundred breaths and we're already down to half our mana!' Kassorith yelled. 'Just use your runes! Who cares if everyone learns about them? We'll worry about the finals later – it's better than losing in the preliminaries!'

'Shut up and let me focus,' Percy replied calmly. His rude response elicited a round of cursing from his host, but he didn't care. 'I think I'm onto something here,' Percy added, putting the debate to rest.

Kassorith wasn't entirely wrong, of course. The Instantaneous Imprints held the potential of turning the battle around if they used them in a smart way, but the window to do that effectively was shrinking with every drop of mana leaving their core. The plasma mage's projectiles had already turned their own steel barrier into a self-created death trap – a metallic oven slowly cooking them alive.

Percy had to do something, and he had to do it fast. Still, he was a greedy person. He didn't just want to win this fight, or stop at the life-extending leaf that waited for him after his victory against the plasma mage. He wanted more. He wanted everything.

Why shouldn't he?

He was the only Red-born in the universe who dared to dream of becoming a god. As somebody who wished to achieve the impossible, he had to strive for it at every turn. He had to surpass everyone else – the Yellow-borns, the Green-borns, the elite disciples, the demigods, the titans, the greater springs, and even the Moirai…

Opportunities like this tournament didn't come by every day. Percy would be damned if he let one slip through his fingers. He couldn't afford to only think about this battle – he had to position himself as well as he could to win the next four rounds as well.

'Come on, Percy… think… what does the ground have in common with the clouds?!'

The flares continued to slam onto their barrier one after another. Percy couldn't tell which way their opponent was attacking them from, since the spells kept coming from every direction. By now, Kassorith had no choice but to fly randomly, since they couldn't spare a sliver of attention to locate the plasma mage.

'Wait… every direction? Why is he going overboard like that?'

Blocking an enemy's escape routes was never a bad plan, but that wasn't exactly applicable in this fight. Kassorith could still smash his way out of the encirclement whenever he wanted – the impacts on his metallic shield just cost him more mana and willpower. But the plasma mage was landing almost all of his blows anyway, so it didn't make a difference whether he fired them in a straight line or at an angle. If anything, it would have been more efficient not to waste time or energy diverting the paths of his spells.

Unless there was a reason for doing so.

'Come to think of it, I never figured out why he delayed his initial attack long enough to surround us with orbs…'

It was almost like the man wanted – no. Needed – to have dozens of constructs around Kassorith at all times. Could that be related to the mystery sense he was using to predict their movements? But how would the purple flares even help with that? All they did was release a ton of heat… pack a lot of force… and… shine brightly.

Percy gasped, everything finally clicking together.

The ground and the clouds that had aided their opponent… The empty air that had worsened the man's predictions instead of improving them… And the bright orbs that had to constantly shine on Kassorith from nearly every angle!

'It's the shadows!' Percy exclaimed, his reptilian heart skipping a beat. 'That's how he's guessing our moves!'