Wanderer 461

Chapter 461: Den

Lifting the bottom of the shaft off the floor, Percy spun the weapon a couple more times, before glancing back at his opponent. It was difficult to make out any of the blurry details, but he still caught traces of pain in the woman's expression and caution in her stance as he spoke.

"Come on. Time to end this."

The female disciple didn't need to be told twice. Despite her injury, she held the advantage, but that wouldn't last much longer. If left alone, Percy would gather even more metal, and his body would slowly rid itself of the toxins. She lunged at him once more, giving him a chance to cleanly bisect her with a horizontal slash. Her body never so much as hit the floor, however, disappearing before her guts spilled onto the arena.

At the same time, a new set of lacerations appeared on Kassorith's torso – only half of the usual damage, thankfully, due to the woman's missing limb. Percy ignored the surge of vertigo ringing inside his borrowed skull, rushing after his opponent while she was still within reach. She was at her most vulnerable right after expending her mind mana, so he couldn't afford to squander the opportunity.

Sadly, she seemed to understand her shortcomings just as well. Slithering away, she kept her distance from Percy, who struggled to catch up – the venom coursing through his host's veins not doing him any favours. The two continued to fight like that – with the woman hovering just out of reach like a vulture, building up her reserves for her occasional attacks, and then running away whenever Percy was about to retaliate.

The good news was that she couldn't deal nearly as much damage with a single hand, and with such infrequent attacks. Even better, Percy managed to land a few hits of his own – his scythe nicking his opponent every second or third time she approached. On top of that, he took a page out of her book, spitting some venom onto his scythe's edge to give the woman a dose of her own medicine. Luckily, Kassorith hadn't removed his fang after the most recent activation of his bloodline, so Percy was able to produce as many toxins as his opponent.

'Not so tough now, are you?' Percy thought, but kept that to himself, knowing that the battle wasn't over yet.

The venom and the amputated limb began to slow the woman down, while Kassorith's body was starting to win against the toxins impairing Percy's senses. Even so, the damage he had received and the blood he had lost still made it difficult to keep fighting. It took everything he had just to stay upright, and he had to guard his vitals at all times. If he made a mistake, it would only take the female disciple a single cast of her mental spell to open him up to a finishing blow.

To prevent that, Percy took full advantage of his scythe's reach, zoning the woman out. He prioritized his safety over everything else, buying time to recover. At the same time, he continued to work alongside his host to gather even more metal mana. They'd coated their throat in a thin, protective layer, spreading the rest evenly across their torso.

The woman seemed to realize her desperate attacks weren't getting her anywhere, so she stopped wasting her mana. Through Mana Sense, Percy saw the resource accumulate inside his opponent's head, likely building up to something nasty. It wasn't that hard to guess what she was planning either. Seeing how she couldn't win a battle of attrition, her only option was to end the fight quickly. She probably intended to gather as much mana as she could, to try and throw Percy's senses off for a prolonged period of time. If she managed to slip through his defences before the effects of her rare affinity faded, he'd be screwed.

'We need to be ready for it,' Percy advised, bringing his host up to speed.

Before long, he and Kassorith had enough mana for a second scythe. Feeding the liquid metal into the first one's enchantments, they got a fluid covered in intricate unit cells back. The woman gritted her gums at the sight of Percy's new weapon, her facial features now clear to him even from a distance. Still, she didn't attack yet, likely judging that she wasn't ready. She continued to wait just outside his range, drawing more and more mana to her head. Percy didn't rush, doing the same. Two scythes were great, but he could expertly wield thrice as many if she gave him the chance.

Soon, the third one took form, Percy wielding all of his weapons with renewed vigour. Their shafts rolled and pivoted along his host's joints, their curved edges crying shrilly as they split the air. The choir of scythes filled the stadium with tension, the audience hushing in a wave, sensing something monstrous was about to be born. But Percy wasn't satisfied with that, realizing that he could accomplish so much more inside this body.

'Kassorith is far stronger than me. Especially after the ritual. His joints are more flexible too. Even his mana can bend more easily without breaking…'

The only downside was that the steel was a lot heavier than Percy's reinforced mana, but the countless lightness runes along its surface had solved that problem entirely. Free of the venom at last, Percy pushed himself to his very limit, allowing the weapons to spin faster still, the blades turning into a complete blur that even he struggled to keep track of. A series of afterimages coiled around him like silver snakes, forming an inviolable zone of death.

Kassorith's lower body was the only inconvenience, since it prevented Percy from reproducing his main body's elegant footwork. If it hadn't been for that, he might have caught the woman already. However, the Thess'kalan's tail offered an advantage of its own – it allowed him to weave his upper body back and forth, or from left to right, granting his movements a whole new dimension. Other than that, he was more than happy to let his opponent come to him, since he could just produce more scythes if she waited.

The woman sighed. She'd either gathered enough mana to attack, or realized she'd never get a better chance. So, she moved.

Like all the previous times, Percy didn't even notice her firing the spell. All of his senses went dark as he found himself suspended in an endless void. Even the very ground beneath Kassorith's tail seemed to vanish, as did the air inside his lungs, or the gravity allowing him to tell up from down. The silence was suffocating – a crushing stillness that gnawed at his nerves more savagely than any wound. No reaction from the crowd, no scrape of steel – just the abyss pressing in.

But he didn't panic, knowing this was just the mind mana's doing. He was still in the same spot, armed with all the scythes he had painstakingly forged, their ferocious blades protecting his body like before. As long as he survived the next few seconds, the battle would be over, and both sets of ritual ingredients would belong to him.

The only things Percy could still feel were internal in nature. There was the sharp sting of his numerous wounds, his racing heartbeat, and his burning muscles. He felt some resistance as the blades met flesh – probably shredding the woman's body into minced meat – though it was muted. Percy had to be extra careful to keep swinging his weapons like before with so little feedback.

The resistance disappeared the very next second, the corpse probably fading away. Another met the same fate, followed by two more. Percy had no idea how many illusions the woman had conjured in total, but it didn't matter. He just had to slice through everything that came near.

Intensifying his efforts, he felt the scales on Kassorith's palms peel, the joints in his fingers screaming in protest. Everything around him was cut to pieces – real or not. Even if the woman somehow survived, she'd lose as long as he protected his host's vitals for another moment. Counting how much time she'd spent gathering the mana, it shouldn't be long before his senses returned.

In the end, he failed to completely stop her.

Before the world even regained its colour, he felt a few deep lacerations appear on his reptilian body, bringing new injections of venom with them. Percy had to commend his opponent for managing to slip through the fleeting gaps in his barrier of death. Sadly for her, the price she'd paid to get this far had been steep.

Percy's scythes collided with something unbreakable, one of the edges shattering on the spot, the other two weapons flying violently out of his hands. But he grinned, using the final shaft under his control to prop himself up. There was only one thing in the whole stadium hard enough to stop his slashes – the arena's enchantments, protecting the woman from certain death.

Something came to a halt behind him, as the darkness around him was replaced by a flash of light, his senses returning one by one. Colours blended, before settling into the familiar backdrop of the cheering spectators, Kassorith's ears buzzing with their enthused cries. The scent of iron rushed back, sharp and overwhelming, the blood on the arena reclaiming its presence with brutal clarity. A flick of his host's tongue revealed the woman's warm body crashing limp on the floor, as Mana Sense showed her core burning in her sternum with the same intensity it had at the start of their battle – its contents mostly untouched. Finally, countless tiny fountains of blood hissed across her body, drenching the female disciple in a sticky pool as Percy whispered the name of his new technique:

"Carnival of the Savage Gods, Third Parade, Serpents' Den."

Technically, he hadn't actually used his boosting art to execute the manoeuvre, relying on his host's superior physique instead. Still, Percy hoped that his new mutation and his soon-to-be-improved trollsfury tattoo would allow him to replicate the move once he returned to Remior. Making his scythes more flexible shouldn't be too hard, at least – he just had to weave their shafts out of his magical silk, after tweaking its properties slightly for rigidity. ℞ANOBĘṢ

Either way, that was a project for later.

Turning around, he examined his opponent's injuries. Drenched in blood as she was, the woman was still alive, her back heaving up and down weakly with every breath. Colourful runes shone through the crimson film covering her from head to tail.

Lifting what remained of his weapon triumphantly, his eyes scanned the roaring crowd, the whole arena trembling with excitement as he finally paid attention to their chants:

"KASSORITH! KASSORITH! KASSORITH!"

Chapter 462 – Void tournament

'I'm going to miss your affinity when I'm gone,' Percy said.

His host's metal mana was among his favourites, offering many advantages over his own pure mana. In fact, Percy didn't think he could use his new trick without it – be it the original Instantaneous Imprint spell or its most recent upgrade, the Instantaneous Armament. Both of those relied on the malleability of Kassorith's mana, which Percy's lacked. Of course, having a spell he couldn't use with his main body wasn't a first. His Concussive Blast had started like that too, yet he had found a way to elevate it into a powerful Secret Art. He had no doubt his new spell would earn its own spot in his arsenal sooner or later.

'Says the man with the soul affinity,' Kassorith replied, rolling his eyes.

Ignoring the Thess'kalan's quip, Percy shifted his attention back to the rewards in the "Personal Improvement" chamber. While he wasn't going to make any rash decisions, he couldn't help but revisit the possibility of grabbing a composite affinity-changing treasure from the shelf. A few of those had found their way into the prize pool after their most recent match. Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – a metal affinity wasn't among them. It wouldn't have been suitable for Elaine anyway, and the rest weren't ideal for him or Nesha. Besides, he still had no idea what affinity his wasp familiar would awaken, so common mana types were a safer bet for everyone involved.

Other than that, the composite treasures offered by the tournament had much stricter expiration dates thanks to their rarity and the harsher conditions they required to appear. Even among the common resources, Percy couldn't see any that would last indefinitely, but he did find a lightning-affinity treasure that would survive for another three years and could be used by multiple people. That was probably the one he'd choose if he and Kassorith made it through the next battle.

For now, it was his host's turn to claim a prize, however.

Kassorith grabbed another of the new rewards that had only appeared on the shelves after the semi-final. It was a complete set of ritual ingredients! Percy fought the urge to swear after realizing he could have claimed two additional rewards if he'd just waited.

'Well, not exactly,' he corrected himself with a mental sigh.

The other options hadn't been great during the earlier rounds, so he would have had to make the same choices. Besides, getting this far into the tournament hadn't been a guarantee, nor would he have had any spare ingredients to bet against the woman if he hadn't claimed them. All things considered, he didn't regret any of his decisions, though he did briefly consider grabbing a third set of ingredients later, instead of the lightning treasure. In the end, he decided against it, thinking it would be overkill.

'What are you going to do with your spares anyway?' he asked his host.

As a Thess'kalan, Kassorith had already received most of the benefits from the first bath, so Percy hadn't expected him to claim more ingredients. He'd really thought his host would have grabbed one of those enslaved towns he'd been ogling, or a fancy weapon forged by a demigod.

The man shrugged. 'I'll probably hold on to it for now. I don't think I'm strong enough to participate in the tournament again, but I might be able to trade my ingredients for next year's exclusives.'

Okay, Percy had to admit that was a brilliant idea – one that he would have loved to copy. Sadly, he wasn't planning to wait on Thess'kala for another year. He'd already earned way too many valuable things and learned a lot of key information that he had to bring back at all costs. Every additional day here was a risk – especially after exposing the Vault's runecrafting. He wouldn't be surprised if multiple organizations were already planning to reach out to Kassorith.

Of course, Percy could try asking last year's winners for a trade, but that wasn't a great idea either. Most of them must've used their rewards or traded them away already. Percy didn't have time to go around asking people, nor did the thirty-year alchemy scholarship or the demigod enchanting his scales sound like things he could bring back to Remior.

‘Oh well. Let’s not be too greedy. Two ritual baths and a lightning-granting treasure are more than I could have hoped for,’ he consoled himself before giving his host a dire warning. ‘I suggest you don’t get any funny ideas of throwing the next fight now that you got your last prize.’

‘I’m not suicidal,’ Kassorith spat. ‘Besides, there’s still something in it for me – if we win the whole tournament.’

Percy perked up, prompting his host to elaborate.

‘The winners of the regional tournaments earn a ticket to an even grander competition. The rewards there can’t even be compared to the things you’ve seen so far.’

Percy’s borrowed brow lifted at the sound of that, a ripple of misguided anticipation running through him. Truth be told, he’d long suspected that Thess’kala hosted some kind of world tournament – a competition to decide the best of the regional champions. Not doing that would have been quite the missed opportunity. However, Kassorith’s next words suggested that Percy was still underestimating the scope of this follow-up tournament.

‘I know what you’re thinking, but your guess is a little off,’ Kassorith replied with a chuckle. ‘There’s no global competition on Thess’kala. Rather, our regional champions have a chance to participate in the void tournament – along with prodigies from the entire alliance.’

The revelation caused a stir in Percy’s wisp. The whole alliance? So, this was a tournament held between dozens of greater springs, many of them even more advanced than Thess’kala! He could hardly imagine the kinds of prizes offered to the winners.

Still, something didn’t add up.

‘Why would you care about that, though? You said you’re not feeling confident signing up for the regional tournament again, let alone this.’

Kassorith laughed.

‘Of course not. At least, not anytime soon. The thing is, you don’t have to join the void tournament immediately. The ticket is more like an open invitation with no expiration date. I’m free to redeem it a thousand years from now – or ten. I can even use it to join the Violet or White division after I advance, if I feel better about my odds. Even if I never do, I can always trade the ticket away. Our regional champions would never say no to an extra chance, since nobody can win the local tournaments every single year. No matter how you slice it, the ticket is far more precious than my spare set of ritual ingredients.’

Listening to his host’s explanation, Percy felt cheated. Kassorith hadn’t even mentioned the ticket when they made their agreement, and he had no idea how they could split it in half, nor could he use it himself. At least, it was a good thing that his host was motivated to keep trying until the very end, but Percy was absolutely going to demand additional compensation in case they won.

‘How do your people compare with the geniuses of the alliance?’ he asked, changing the topic slightly.

‘Not favourably.’ Kassorith sighed. ‘Even our strongest regional champions struggle to get through the first round – though the participation prizes are still worthwhile. The Void Hand’s founding members often produce mages talented enough to fight opponents two grades above their own.’

Percy drew a sharp breath. Two grades higher? That was the same as him! Evidently, his situation wasn’t unprecedented in the entire universe as he’d initially thought – just rare on Thess’kala.

‘What about three grades? Has there ever been a mortal that powerful?’ he asked again, unable to suppress his curiosity.

‘People like that do appear from time to time. But only once every several millennia. They’re rarer than titans, and no less valuable. After all, those who make it to the Clear grade are powerful enough to hold their own against some of the weaker gods, as mere mortals. That might not sound like much, but it’s extremely important, since it allows their factions to deploy them to lesser springs.’

‘Lesser springs? Why does that matter? Can’t a faction like the Moirai or the Void Hand obliterate a lesser spring in an instant?’ Percy asked, somewhat confused.

‘They can, but it’s not so simple. If they send their strongest gods, they can break through the hostile planet’s natural defences with raw power. But those people are typically busy with more important matters. Alternatively, they can send lots of regular demigods to overwhelm the local deities, yet many of them will die in the process. In both cases, it comes down to weighing risk against reward. The presence of a powerful demigod flips the cost-benefit curve on its head, rendering many otherwise-wasteful missions worthwhile. Besides, mortals like that tend to become extremely powerful gods sooner or later. No matter what, they’re among the most valuable assets a faction could ask for.’

Percy mentally nodded in understanding, itching for the opportunity to participate in this void tournament. Not only would he love to test his strength against such talented people, but the prizes there sounded even more alluring than those he’d earned on Thess’kala. He might even find that first-generation leaf he needed, or a treasure capable of granting him a rare affinity.

Even so, he knew he wouldn’t be able to do this while borrowing Kassorith’s body. His host was already at his limits fighting against his fellow Thess’kalans – let alone the monsters standing at the very top of the Void Hand. As for joining the interplanetary competition with his main body – that was even more ridiculous. Remior wasn’t a greater spring, nor was it a member of the alliance. Revealing his identity would be idiotic.

Besides, he doubted the competition even had a division for Yellows. Percy would need to advance a couple more times just to be eligible. Either that, or he would have to find a better host. Regardless, the chamber around him suddenly felt a lot smaller, the walls leaning closer, pressing the weight of possibility against his non-existent shoulders.

‘The void tournament… maybe one day.’

For now, he and Kassorith had one last opponent to beat.

Chapter 463 – Final round

Kassorith’s eighth fight was strange, but also rather straightforward. His opponent simply stood in the centre of the arena, unarmed and unmoving. A single powerful spell – or even a well-placed slash of Kassorith’s enhanced claws – would have been enough to win Percy and his host the battle, and the whole tournament with it.

At least in theory.

Unfortunately, the burly man they were facing hadn't made it this far into the competition by being an idiot. Ice mana – like Micky's, give or take a couple of grades – continuously gushed out of his pores, blending seamlessly with his domain, along with something else: the influence of his insidious bloodline.

This one was called Absolute Zero.

Percy had been shocked to learn about it, because it reminded him of his family's bloodline in some ways. Its effect was nothing like Clone, but the way it got passed from parent to child along with the ice affinity was something he'd never encountered elsewhere. Not only did this ensure that most of its inheritors ended up with a composite affinity without the need to consume any rare treasures, but it also granted them a very specialized skillset, making them far stronger than their peers.

The bloodline's effect was simple enough. It merely lowered the temperature of the man's surroundings. Still, it was extremely potent once combined with its owner's mana and expertly wielded domain. The air itself seemed to scream in protest, every breath turning into needles of frost that stabbed the throat.

Kassorith poured some of his lightning mana into the enchanted longswords, aiming them at his opponent. Indigo arcs of electricity danced wildly along the steel surface, causing the intricate network of interlocked symbols to flash rhythmically. The silver blades turned red-hot, and then white, vibrating with barely contained power. Then, they shot toward their target, their sharpened tips crying shrilly as they sliced through the frigid air.

Sadly, the swords never found their mark.

It was as if they had stabbed through a sea of honey, every centimetre they travelled through robbing them of both heat and momentum. By the time they approached the ice user – who was just a few dozen metres away – their colour had returned to normal, the lightning mana exhausted. Worse still, the enchantments had all dimmed and the metal had turned brittle after cooling rapidly, shattering before the blades even hit the ground.

Kassorith scowled upon realizing that his weapons had barely crossed two-thirds of the distance. Perhaps, that could be fixed if they moved closer to their opponent before firing the next barrage, but that wasn't really an option. Even with his elevated resistance to low temperatures, Kassorith shivered with his back against the wall, a wave of lethargic numbness rippling through his bones every time a new

breath of cold air filled his shrivelled lungs. Frost had already begun to creep along the walls of the arena, weaving jagged veins across the battleground like a spreading sickness.

The good news was that the ice user hadn't bothered to chase them, nor had he wasted even a drop of mana to attack them directly. It wasn't that he didn't want to finish the fight a second sooner, but that he likely couldn't lift his concentration off the channelled ability for even a moment. Evidently, he had no choice but to stay put in the middle of the arena, waiting for his frozen kingdom to do his dirty work. This gave Percy and Kassorith a chance to prepare as many attacks as they wanted, though that didn't seem to be enough.

The two had naturally considered flying out of the stadium to escape the frozen hellscape, but their opponent hadn't given them that option. As soon as the announcer had declared the start of the battle, the ice user had activated all the aspects of his strange technique at once, instantly forming a thick dome of ice above the battleground. It had sealed everyone inside, blocking every exit as it plunged the arena in near-darkness, Kassorith's surroundings barely illuminated by faint ripples of mana softly glittering across the crystalline prison. Obviously, they'd already tried breaking out, but the ice appeared to sap the energy of their attacks the moment they drew near, much like their opponent's body did.

'Any ideas?' Kassorith asked, a trace of urgency in his voice.

'Working on it. At least, he's giving us all the time in the world to counter him,' Percy replied with a mental shrug.

'I'm sure he gave his previous opponents plenty of time too, but that didn't help them much,' Kassorith fired back.

Percy had no retort, knowing that his host was right. He'd already enchanted Kassorith's constructs as much as possible, going even farther than he had against the metal user with the blessing. Even after applying his domain and Kassorith's lightning mana onto the weapons, they'd failed to put a scratch on the man.

Thinking back to his previous battles, Percy couldn't help but notice a pattern. All of the tournament's participants were elite disciples who'd earned their status due to their powerful affinities, unique bloodlines, or the skilful application of their domains – no surprise there – but the ones standing at the very top of the competition seemed to have something more going for them. People like the female disciple from the Ancestral Lineage Sect that they'd faced in the semi-finals – or their current opponent

– had woven their distinct advantages into a cohesive fighting style, leveraging all of their abilities properly.

'In some ways, they're like me, aren't they?' Percy realized.

The Carnival of the Savage Gods was arguably his strongest spell, as well as the main reason he could defeat enemies multiple grades higher than his own. Percy's boosting art represented the perfect union of many of his unique advantages – such as his twin cores, the original version of the Dance that Micky's people had invented, the Vault's magiscript, Percy's reinforced mana, the Moirais' affinity fusion, the mutated eyes he had snatched from Atlantis, and many other things.

Was this the key to obtaining true strength? Building a solid foundation atop a series of thick pillars? Was this why Phoebe had designed such a flexible Decree, encouraging mages to develop all sorts of independent spells, before eventually merging them into something greater than the sum of its parts?

At first glance, Percy's Status did very little to directly strengthen his spells – in fact, it wouldn't have affected them much at all, if not for his glowing eyes drawing from the accumulated information in his page. The base Decree merely acknowledged and registered his efforts, providing him with a framework and with ideas on how he could improve his arsenal. Perhaps, that had been its purpose all along – Phoebe's way of helping Remior eventually give birth to elite disciples. Or maybe, the Status was currently incomplete, the ancient titaness having yet to fully implement all of its intended features.

Either way, watching the ice user dominate the competition through his powerful technique, Percy was reminded once again of something that he honestly already knew: strength didn't just come from the advantages one was lucky to be born with, but also by the clever ways in which they used them.

'That's great, but it won't solve our current problem,' he thought, shaking away the distractions.

Naturally, the best way to counter his opponent's frigid domain would be with a lot of heat. Unfortunately, Kassorith's lightning mana didn't excel at warming things up. Working a few heating enchantments into the unit cells and replacing the longswords with new variants better suited for this battle might help, but Percy would still struggle to match the heat produced by an actual fire – or fire-adjacent – affinity. Not to mention that the ice mage had already overcome several opponents like that in the previous rounds.

‘The answer should still lie within my new trait. It’s served me well until now – I’m sure there’s even more I can do with it.’

It wasn’t just optimism speaking. Percy hadn’t had Scribing nearly as long as Weaving or Insomnia, but he’d already found more applications for it than both of his other traits combined. He didn’t think that was an accident either. Scribing allowed him to capitalize on his existing magiscript knowledge – a skill that he’d painstakingly honed through years of rigorous study. It only made sense that he’d been able to dig up so much buried potential in such a short time.

The only question was how it could be leveraged in this situation.

Pulling some metal mana from his host’s core, he forged a new longsword, this one clean. He enchanted it from scratch, sneaking heat runes into the unit cells. Since their opponent had kindly given them so much time to experiment, Percy would be a fool to turn him down. Even so, he understood that their time wasn’t without its limits. Numbness had already permeated his host’s limbs, making even the slightest move a struggle. If their next attack failed, they wouldn’t get another. Piling onto their problems, engraving the heating enchantments into the constructs would help a lot, but it wouldn’t be enough.

‘A single layer of runes will barely bring our lightning affinity on par with fire. I need to go deeper.’

If there was one thing that Percy had learned during this tournament, it was that there were countless ways for him to apply his enchantments – methods that he hadn’t even considered in the past. This was especially the case with his spectral trait taking care of the logistics, requiring nothing from him other than to breathe meaning into the symbols. And Percy already had an idea on how to take his newest spell a step farther.

Would it work?

He hadn’t a clue, having never tried anything like this before. Despite the uncertainty, he was determined to try. Whether he won or not, he would accept the outcome, having already gained more from this trip than he’d ever thought possible. Even so, there was only one way for him to leave Thess’kala with his chin held high – and it was after doing his best.

‘Come on, then. Let’s see if you can stop me from melting your fancy little dome to the ground…’

Chapter 464 – Formation

Before long, a new flock of enchanted weapons hovered silently by Kassorith's side. Percy and his host had spent several minutes replenishing their reserves and replacing the constructs with the new model, their body almost paralyzed completely by the time they were done. Suffice to say, they wouldn't last long enough for another attempt, should their next attack fail.

'Charge the swords with about half as much lightning mana as you can muster and leave the rest to me,' Percy told Kassorith – who was a lot better at wielding his own mana types.

The Thess'kalan was still oblivious to Percy's plan – since the latter hadn't bothered to share any specifics – but he followed the instructions without protest, clearly trusting him enough by now. Kassorith flooded the weapons with electricity, causing them to buzz with power, though there was a noticeable difference from their previous barrage.

The indigo flashes zapping through the enchantments now sported a reddish hue, the swords radiating a lot more heat than before. The extreme temperature differential distorted the air, transparent plumes rising up, as the thin sheet of frost beneath Kassorith's tail cracked under his weight. The change relieved Percy and his host from their growing discomfort, though they both understood it wouldn't last long. Based on their rapid consumption, their core would dry up in the next few seconds, leaving them exposed again. The sharp scent of heated metal lingered in the air, tickling Percy's borrowed nostrils.

Not wasting any time, Percy allowed his spectral trait to take over, having found a brand-new canvas to draw his runes on, as well as a new brush. Working in tandem with his host, he launched the swords once more, though he didn't aim directly at their opponent. Instead, he steered the trajectory of their constructs away, knowing that not doing that would have only given the ice user's domain a chance to rob the steel of its accumulated strength.

The sharpened blades arrived at their destination in an instant, sinking about halfway into the tiled floor. Kassorith's opponent spared the swords just a sliver of attention, his focused expression giving way to a faint frown – curious and amused in equal parts. The poor fool hadn't the slightest clue what they were up to. Not that Percy was much more confident that his plan would work, but he was already committed to finding out.

"Here goes nothing," he spat through gritted gums, letting the Scribing trait adjust the weapons slightly, shifting them along the floor by a few centimetres. He even softened the metal, bending the blades into smoother, interlocking curves.

Something clicked in his mind – feedback from a new layer of enchantments under his control. The confirmation of his plan's feasibility caused the corners of his borrowed lips to curl up, while the ice mage's smirk froze on his face instead, most ironically. At the same time, the temperature in the arena began to rise at a modest pace. The air carried the faint tang of ozone and scorched dust, the sort of detail that even the crowd might have felt prickle on their tongues if not for the various barriers blocking the scent. The change wasn't very obvious at first, but Percy wasn't that surprised that his opponent had noticed it. Given how he fought, the man was probably even more sensitive to things like that than Kassorith.

Even so, it wasn't until several seconds later that the ice mage seemed to fully wrap his mind around what had happened, his eyes widening in shock. Simply put, Percy had used the swords themselves as the ink, drawing yet another layer of heating runes onto the arena!

The blades formed the strokes of the magical symbols, the heat released by the smaller runes along their metallic surfaces blending with the residual lightning mana to fuel the new enchantments. If one paid close attention, they would notice that the crackling bolts of electricity now sported an even deeper crimson colour, as more of their power got converted to heat. Their effect had already surpassed what should be possible with a simple fire affinity. In fact, Percy was confident the constructs were now approaching the temperature of Gabe's mana – despite lacking his friend's aptly-named blessing.

To accomplish this, Percy had actually taken a page out of Metatron's book. The titan had invented an entire runecrafting language with the express purpose of allowing the runes to be combined more easily – either by overlapping the symbols, or by linking them side-by-side into tightly packed networks of unit cells.

Those weren't the only ways to double down on their effects, however. Percy was probably just reinventing the wheel, but he now realized he could also draw the enchantments on separate, yet overlapping, mediums. Of course, it wasn't like he could have even attempted this in the past. Before obtaining his latest trait, he hadn't been able to control so many constructs with such precision, nor did he possess any enchantments that could be used in this manner – amplified to such extremes.

"It doesn't matter," the ice user whispered, unconcerned, breaking his silence for the first time since the start of the battle. His voice was soft, but Percy and Kassorith heard it clearly, as did the spectators, most likely, thanks to the stadium's enchantments feeding the sound through the barrier and amplifying its volume. "I'll admit this is a clever trick – better than anything my previous opponents have tried. But it's not enough to break through my bloodline."

Percy's smile only widened at his opponent's lazy taunt. "Who said that I was done?"

Grabbing the hilt of the nearest longsword – one planted within an arm's length of his host's body – he drew the rest of Kassorith's lightning mana, pouring it into the construct. The colour shifted once as it flashed through the runes, and a second time as it leapt to the swords next to it.

But that was just the start.

A crimson chain continued to hop from one group of interlocked weapons to the other, each set radiating a tremendous amount of heat with every deep flash, causing the very ground beneath them to suffer. The ice cracked and the water boiled, even the stone turning red-hot for the briefest of instants. The crowd gasped audibly now, the heat so intense that even the protective wards buzzed in protest. The roar of evaporating frost filled the stadium like a chorus of angry spirits.

One by one, the runes lit up across the floor, a rhythmic dance of hellish bolts spreading through the battlefield. The superheated mana picked more stray electricity along its path, the enchantments blinking faster with each violent revolution. Before long, it was almost impossible to tell them apart, the mana jumping so quickly between the constructs that the whole tapestry of magic seemed to settle into a permanent blur, humming with ill-concealed fury.

Judging by his unimpressed gaze, the ice mage still didn't believe he was in any real danger. From his vantage point – smack between all the medium-sized runes – he couldn't truly see what was happening. But Percy saw everything well enough, the longswords' precise locations clear in his mind.

"Let's see how you do against this one," he said as one final rune took form, falling under his control. It was a single heating rune, not that different from all the others giving it its shape – except, of course, for its sheer size, the colossal amount of scorching mana fuelling it, and the two prior layers of similar enchantments supporting it.

An ominous flash filled the frozen dome, dispelling the oppressive darkness. Percy barely registered the crystalline ceiling cracking open like an egg before a crushing wave of hot air slammed onto his host, pressing him against the barrier. Despite Kassorith's resistance to heat, his high grade, and the two domains protecting his body, Percy and his host still felt a rush of searing pain on their chest and face, the blast peeling their scales off and frying the soft flesh beneath. It almost felt like their eyes had melted within their sockets, Kassorith's heat-sensitive tongue burning to a crisp like a cheap wick. The stench of scorched flesh clung to the air, sickly sweet and impossible to ignore.

This second-hand blast that they themselves had caused might have killed them, if not for a foreign sensation spreading over their body the very next moment, preventing further damage. Percy struggled to understand what was going on, because most of his host's senses had stopped functioning properly. Still, he scarcely registered a series of complex enchantments drawn by another's hand covering their burnt flesh. Those were naturally the stadium's runes, having activated to save Kassorith from certain death – the match was over!

Percy would have grinned if the heat hadn't twisted the muscles on his host's face beyond his control. Getting saved by the stadium would have normally meant their disqualification. However, if Kassorith had suffered so much damage while standing at the very edge of the arena, their opponent was bound to have had an even worse time – located in the epicentre of the blast as he was.

'Use your bloodline,' Percy advised.

Kassorith didn't need to be told twice, the two of them soon finding themselves in a brand-new, child-like body. They didn't rush to consume their discarded flesh, their priority being to use their now-repaired eyes to examine the aftermath of their attack.

There was no trace of the frozen dome left. Smoke still rose from the centre of the arena, making it difficult to see what had happened to their opponent. A wide, circular crater spanned about a third of the floor, filled with boiling magma. A body floated atop the viscous liquid, protected from the extreme heat by the same colourful runes that Percy and Kassorith had seen so many times during the tournament. The man was still alive, a pained expression visible on his face. His scales had been charred black from head to tail, leaving the ice mage in an even worse state than the dried-up husk that Kassorith had just discarded.

The crowd – that had previously gone silent as they waited for the outcome with bated breaths – suddenly erupted in cheers, the announcer's booming voice declaring Kassorith's victory. The tiny Thess'kalan's heart thrummed excitedly in his chest,his small claws trembling as adrenaline coursed through his veins. But Percy didn't care about any of that, his attention drawn to his new notification.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Spectral Art: Instantaneous Armament – Refined -> Spectral Art: Instantaneous Formation – Masterful!]

Chapter 465 – Ingenuity

Flying through the sea of clouds, Kassorith couldn't help but toss the occasional glance at the amethyst badge pinned to his tunic, on the side opposite his spatial device. It was only half the size of his palm, the deep, purple gemstone cut into a pentagonal shape, the faint outline of a clawed hand carved onto its face.

The object didn't actually have a function other than allowing him to enter the void tournament. Still, he wasn't in a hurry to store it away. No way he would forgo the joy of displaying his trophy proudly upon his return.

'I thought I'd be feeling better after winning the whole tournament,' he thought to himself, sighing internally.

Becoming an elite disciple was already beyond his wildest dreams, but rising to the very top of the competition was another thing entirely. Right now, he wasn't just a powerful mage in his sect's eyes – he was a priceless asset!

They'd never send him on another mission in his life. Not even if he begged them to. No way they'd risk their most famous elite disciple like that. Kassorith was now more valuable training in seclusion inside the sect, hidden and protected from their enemies. He'd live the rest of his life in luxury, showered with resources and treated as a prince! In fact, the only reason he hadn't claimed one of those slave towns from the tournament, was because he knew there were other ways to get one, given this outcome.

Had this been a few weeks ago, Kassorith would have been overjoyed. Back when Percy had saved his life, he hadn't expected much more from the foreigner. In Kassorith's eyes, his guest had been a nobody – just a low-born peasant from some backwater planet, lucky to possess both a rare affinity and one of the most powerful bloodlines Kassorith had ever heard of.

Bringing his soul back from the verge of death had been a welcome surprise – and one that Kassorith had been more than willing to repay with a small reward, such as the Cascading Cracks technique. It should have been enough, shouldn't it? No way Percy's people had ever come across anything even remotely as valuable.

But the foreigner hadn't been satisfied with that, having the gall to demand more. And not just a cheap artifact or some Crude spell, but a leaf from the sapling – of all things. The bastard had even had the audacity to blackmail him for it.

When Percy had voiced his ridiculous demands to Syrreneth, Kassorith had felt his blood boil, thinking that the greedy alien would cost him his life. He certainly hadn't believed that his guest had been capable of delivering on his grand promises.

Turning him into an elite disciple? Reaching the top sixteen of the tournament?

What a joke.

Had it been that easy, Kassorith would have long accomplished that by himself. What hope did Percy have – an ignorant stranger who didn't know the first thing about Thess'kala or the Void Hand? And in a borrowed body no less?

And yet, Percy had proven him wrong, time after time.

He'd earned him those trims. He'd won the first battle in the tournament. And the second. And the third. Before Kassorith knew it, they'd made it to the second phase of the tournament, but that wasn't even the end of it – only the beginning. No matter who stood against them, Percy kept pulling one trick after another from a seemingly bottomless bag, overcoming Thess'kala's proudest sons and daughters without pause.

It was frightening, really.

Kassorith wasn't very surprised by any of Percy's individual abilities. Granted, those deceptively simple runes of his were far more potent than Thess'kala's, so he couldn't help but be a little curious about their origin. The foreigner's skill at drawing the symbols in an instant – and on pretty much any medium – was also strange, as was the fact that Percy didn't require sleep. Still, all of that had been well within Kassorith's expectations.

With a bloodline like that, even a monkey would have grown powerful. Kassorith had no idea how many places his guest had visited before Thess'kala, but if the bastard had approached all of his previous hosts with the same insatiable appetite and shameless persistence that he'd shown toward him, it was no wonder he'd acquired so many strange abilities.

What he found most impressive wasn't the endless assortment of tools hidden in Percy's soul, but the sheer ingenuity with which he wielded them. No matter the situation – no matter how insurmountable his opponents had seemed – Percy had always found a way to overcome them.

He'd developed new spells in the heat of battle, systematically dismantled some of the most troublesome bloodlines and techniques Kassorith had ever faced, and strategically leveraged even the most insignificant of his assets. Percy had used everything in his power – and then some – to claw his way to the very top.

'Is he really from a lesser spring?' Kassorith wondered.

He didn't think Percy had feigned his ignorance of cosmic matters. Or was he an excellent actor too, on top of everything else?

Percy had used up his soul mana to repair Kassorith's injuries before the latter managed to examine the substance properly, but the few traces he spotted within the enchantments on his soul left him confident that Percy was merely a Yellow.

Normally, that would have been enough for Kassorith – or anyone else – to write the foreigner off. An Orange-born, or even a Red-born from a lesser spring? Thess'kala had bugs with more potential than that. If it ate enough cores, even an insect might attain divinity. But not Percy. Even if he kept amassing power for a few more centuries, the most likely scenario was that he'd eventually piss the wrong god off, bringing calamity to himself and his people.

At least, that was what Kassorith's logic told him.

Yet, after seeing the foreigner's boundless resolve and determination, he couldn't help but question those assumptions. Were there truly limits that Percy would fail to overcome?

If he really was at Yellow, he shouldn't have lived longer than a century. Even at such a young age, he'd turned into quite a monster. What if he snuck into more greater springs in the future? Into the Void Hand's strongholds? What if he stole from Sixiang or the Moirai? What if he found a first-generation leaf to extend his lifespan or a Focus from the wise gnomes?

‘Maybe this is a bad idea after all…’ Kassorith thought as the faint outline of the Broken Fang Sect’s pillar appeared in the distance. The looming structure jutted above the horizon like a jagged fang piercing through the cloud sea, its dark silhouette heavy with foreboding.

He’d already tried to backstab his guest once, and how had that turned out? Kassorith wanted to call his master and beg him to reconsider. But he knew better than to try and steer Syrreneth away from this madness. On top of that, he couldn’t exactly attempt to reconvene with the Violet while sharing a body with Percy. The foreigner would snuff his life in an instant if he so much as suspected the betrayal.

‘I just hope he knows what he’s doing…’

Kassorith’s situation had prevented him from discussing the plan with his master, but there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell the Violet would even consider handing the jade leaf to an outsider. Claiming it from the sect’s vault and displaying it during the call had been nothing but a ruse.

In theory, Percy wasn’t capable of much by himself. Despite his impressive performance in the tournament, he shouldn’t be able to accomplish anything in Kassorith’s body without his consent.

The only thing they had to watch out for was the possibility of ravaging his soul and fleeing Thess’kala. Syrreneth was many things, but he wasn’t a fool – surely, he’d taken precautions for that. Even though he knew the truth about Kassorith, the rest of their people didn’t, so the Violet wouldn’t risk losing his prized asset. No matter how Kassorith sliced it, reason told him that they had everything under control. Even so, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something could go wrong.

‘Say, what are we going to do about that ticket of yours?’ Percy suddenly asked, startling him.

Kassorith forced himself to calm down before replying, not wanting to alert the foreigner right before the inevitable ambush.

‘What the fuck do you want us to do? Split it in half?’ he asked, struggling to emulate his usual snark.

Percy chuckled. ‘As pretty as it looks, a broken ticket would be useless to me. Even if I had the whole thing, it’s not like I can just waltz into the void tournament and ask them to let me join. Just pay me half

its value and we'll call it even. We've had a wonderful collaboration so far – no reason to sour it on our last day together.'

Kassorith rolled his eyes. 'I'll give you one of my spare ritual ingredients.'

'One?' Percy asked, a pang of sardonic laughter ringing through their connection. 'How about the full set? Didn't you say the ticket is more valuable than the other prizes?'

'It's definitely not twice as valuable,' Kassorith spat, before sighing. 'Look, there's no way I'm giving you the Heartblood, but you can have the two secondary ingredients if you want.'

'Screw that! You know damn well they're useless to me on their own. I'll take the Heartblood and the Abyssal Moss. You can keep the toxins. Trade them away or something.'

'Fine. You can have the Heartblood on its own, but I'll be keeping the rest,' Kassorith partially conceded. His guest was about to protest, but Kassorith stopped him. 'Let's discuss this later. I'm way too tired to haggle with you right now.'

Truth be told, Kassorith just wanted to get Percy off his back, having no intention of sharing anything more with him. In fact, if he knew Syrreneth well – which he did – Percy wouldn't be leaving Thess'kala at all. The elder would no doubt make him spill out all of his runecrafting knowledge, empty that fancy spatial device hidden in his soul, and then destroy his wisp entirely. The bastard could forget about everything – the leaf, the ritual ingredients, the affinity-changing treasure, the cleansing technique. Even his damn memories of this place.

'If he wanted to keep any of his gains, he should have run away while he still had the chance…' Kassorith thought.

Neither spoke as they finally landed in the narrow tunnel leading to Syrreneth's cavern. Tossing his latest greatsword down the cliff, Kassorith rushed through the rune-lit corridor, eager to get this over with and reclaim his freedom.

Soon, they entered the Violet's chamber, finding Syrreneth in the exact same position they'd left him. He was sitting atop his coiled tail in the middle of the room, the sapling's vibrant leaf resting atop the

same crimson cushion from a few days earlier. Noticing their arrival, the elder opened his eyes, his slit pupils scanning them leisurely.

“Well, well… if it isn’t our sect’s resident champion. I’ve waited patiently for your return,” he said, his frigid voice sending a chill down Kassorith’s spine.

“Move away from the cushion,” Percy snapped through Kassorith’s mouth, skipping the small talk entirely. “And don’t even think of trying anything clever.”

“Or what?” Syrreneth’s tone dripped even colder.

A faint slither echoed. Percy turned Kassorith’s head, spotting a shadowed figure emerging from the thick mist – one that they hadn’t noticed before. Using their shared Mana Sense, they soon detected the newcomer’s Blue core.

“So this is how it is?” Percy asked. “After everything I’ve done for you and your sect, are you really going to risk your disciple’s life for more?”

The elder shrugged. “This isn’t about what you’ve already given me. It’s about what else I can take. Why settle for some, when I can have it all? Besides… I’m not risking anything.”

Syrreneth’s voice barely fell, when the Blue standing next to him raised his hand. A new layer of previously hidden runes lit up along the walls, floor and ceiling of the cavern. Unlike the colourful enchantments that normally pulsated rhythmically around the chamber, these sported a faint silver colour. It was obvious they’d been added recently too.

Kassorith didn’t even give Percy a chance to react. Severing their connection, he instantly rejected his guest’s very presence, trying to shove the tiny wisp out of his soul.

The foreigner deactivated all of the enchantments aiding Kassorith’s recovery – much like he’d done the last time – manifesting a series of spectral claws to violently latch on. It was among the most painful things Kassorith had ever experienced, so he wasn’t exactly thrilled to relive it. Especially since he understood that a swift death awaited him if this continued.

However, he wasn't as worried.

The Blue by his master's side was naturally a soul user, and he wasn't here just to block Percy's escape routes. He was also a healer – most likely – brought by his master to patch Kassorith up as soon as they got rid of the foreigner.

'Are you sure you want to do this, Kassorith?' Percy asked, his voice sounding muffled through their broken connection. 'I'm not going to give you a third chance.'

Kassorith swallowed hard, Percy's calm voice giving him a bad premonition. But he knew it was way too late for regrets.

'Just shut up and die already!'

Chapter 466 – Betrayal

'There's no point resisting, Percy,' Kassorith said, a mental sigh faintly echoing through their muted connection. 'To tell you the truth, I didn't want to double cross you this time. Sadly, it's no longer up to me. You sealed your fate when you revealed your existence to my master.'

Percy didn't bother replying, being too busy holding on to his host's soul. The cold-blooded Thess'kalan was trying to evict him even more aggressively than the previous time, likely emboldened by the soul healer waiting to patch him up. Remior's pull had also grown stronger during Percy's stay on the greater spring, making everything worse.

Still, he didn't panic, having honestly expected the betrayal. From the very beginning, he'd known that Kassorith and Syrreneth were nothing but a couple of backstabbing assholes, though it might be a bit hypocritical of him to criticize them for it. After all, Percy had also been torn between pre-emptively betraying Kassorith, or allowing him to harm more innocents in the future. If anything, his host had done him a favour by making the choice easier.

'I need to escape, but there's no chance I'm leaving that thing behind. I've come way too far to give up on the leaf when it's right in front of me…' Percy thought, his spectral claws digging even deeper into his host's soul, eliciting a pained groan.

He concentrated on the foggy chamber, and everything in it. Sensing his surroundings wasn't easy through the broken connection, but Percy had already burned the layout of the room firmly in his mind. He hoped the life-extending leaf was still on the cushion – about ten to fifteen metres away from Kassorith. It was a long distance for a Red-cored mortal, but his Blue host could cover the gap in an instant.

It didn't look like the others had made a move toward him yet either. They were likely waiting for Kassorith to kick him out by himself, not wanting to worsen the latter's injuries by accident. But they would certainly attempt to stop Percy if he tried anything.

'I'll only get one move. I'll have to accomplish a thousand things at once if I want to make it out.'

First and foremost, Percy had to reestablish his connection to Kassorith, otherwise he wouldn't be able to so much as twitch a muscle. Luckily, that wasn't very difficult. He might not be able to forcefully control an unwilling host for a prolonged period of time – especially a Blue – but seizing the man's body for a second or two was more than doable. Percy had already practiced this extensively on several beasts before this trip. None of the Thess'kalans would see it coming either, which was a bonus. Nor did Percy much care what happened to his host afterwards.

'Grabbing the leaf is just the start. I'll need to break out of this room before Kassorith regains control, or the enchantments will prevent my soul from escaping.'

There was zero margin for error. If he messed up any part of the plan, the consequences would be severe. Still, he was confident he could make everything work.

Not wasting any more time, Percy focused on his host. The spectral fiends running rampant inside his wisp grew more erratic, the spider-like limbs digging deeper into Kassorith's injured soul, the long hairs wrapping themselves tightly around everything in their reach. Percy's mind rammed against the Thess'kalan's, in an attempt to force their lost connection to reopen.

'It's useless,' the Blue spoke again. 'If you stop being stubborn, I'll ask my master not to hurt you as much. No need to make this any more painful than it has to be.'

Ignoring Kassorith's quip, Percy doubled his efforts. Time was running out, as both of their souls had already sustained a lot of damage. Finding purchase to hold on to the Thess'kalan had become increasingly difficult.

'Come on! No way I'm losing everything I've gained here!' he yelled internally, pushing through the clogged link with every fibre of his being.

A modest flash of light illuminated Percy's surroundings as Kassorith's blurry vision dimly seeped into his mind. The muffled sounds of Syrreneth talking to his lackey reached Percy's borrowed ears as his fleeting ownership of the Blue's body returned unceremoniously.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Soul-to-soul – Crude -> Spectral Art: Parasitic Connection – Refined!]

Percy didn't bother reading the notification, knowing this wasn't the time nor the place for that. Before Kassorith even registered what had happened, Percy seized control of the man's tail by force, leaping toward the leaf with as much strength as he could muster.

At the same time, he pulled out two objects from his spatial seal, holding them tightly in his host's hands. Their jagged edges ripped into his borrowed palms, a pang of pain helping him experience his environment more vividly. A surge of lightning mana rushed through his arms, flooding the steel constructs.

Kassorith instinctively tried to slow his output to a trickle, but that was fine – Percy didn't need that much anyway. The objects were naturally a couple of fragments from Kassorith's enchanted swords that he'd had the foresight to stash away during the tournament, having expected them to come in handy in a situation like this. Percy didn't know whether his host had noticed his sneaky move in the heat of battle, but it didn't really matter. Either way, he hadn't had the chance – or a reason – to warn the others. Percy hurled the red-hot shards at his enemies as he flew toward the leaf.

Syrreneth reacted long before the soul user did. A powerful domain slammed against Percy's in an attempt to intercept him. Percy's willpower got pushed back with ease, but not enough to arrest his momentum. The elder's move failed to stop the projectile flying toward him, leaving him no choice but to defend himself by hastily manifesting a thin layer of ice on his body.

The Blue wasn't as lucky as his superior. Either he lacked the instincts of a fighter, or his ethereal affinity and weaker body didn't give him as many options as the Violet. Whatever the reason, the man failed to protect himself from the sneak attack, the sharp piece of scorching metal slicing through the scales on his chest as if they were paper, emerging out of his back in an explosion of blood and gore.

Seeing the Blue fall, Percy relaxed a little. He hadn't expected – or even required – his sneak attack to finish Syrreneth off, but the soul mage was a different story entirely – he had to die at all costs. Percy wasn't great at suppressing his blessing yet, so he hadn't tried to do that throughout his stay on Thess'kala. It hadn't been a concern before, because he'd long used up his mana, and nobody in the tournament would have noticed anything strange unless they examined Kassorith from up close with Soul Vision.

That said, he didn't doubt that Syrreneth's unfortunate subordinate had already noticed the odd colouration of the wisp lodged inside Kassorith's soul. That wasn't a problem in and of itself, since they would just assume Percy had been born to a god with a soul affinity. However, this could quickly turn into a major issue when he factored in his pending escape plan.

'So far so good,' Percy thought, finally reaching the giant leaf resting on the cushion. It hadn't even been a second since he took hold of Kassorith's body, but it had honestly felt like an eternity.

The jade treasure disappeared into Percy's spatial seal before the soul user's body even hit the floor, thankfully without giving the Moirais' Decree a chance to awaken from its slumber. Having caught on, Kassorith used his own domain to suppress Percy's, already working hard to sever their newly-forged connection. Syrreneth also looked like he'd recovered from the sneak attack, his domain pressing his disciple against the ground. Clenching his borrowed gums, Percy stubbornly held on to the dissipating link, knowing full well that the rest of his plan couldn't work if he didn't have a physical body.

'Almost there,' he thought as the floor beneath Kassorith and Syrreneth warped, giving way to a backdrop of metallic greys and colourful runes.

"What the hell is this?!" the elder demanded.

Percy didn't care to reply, doing his utmost to suppress every trace of the blessing from his soul. The concept of permanence rapidly receded, robbing Percy of its usual protection. The two traits warring against Kassorith's soul suddenly felt heavier, tearing Percy's wisp to shreds every moment they remained active.

But Percy didn't let the wave of untold agony stop him.

The portal finally took form, the ground disappearing beneath him and Syrreneth, destabilizing their footing. The Violet's domain relaxed slightly as a result, allowing Percy to move again. Taking advantage of the elder's disorientation, Percy slammed his tail down on Syrreneth, wrapping it around the man's torso a couple of times as he sank into the artificial world. Using what little of his domain he could still wield, as well as his host's enhanced physical strength, he tried his best to drag the elder with him.

Crossing the spatial channel made Percy dizzy as always, but he'd experienced this plenty of times. Kassorith hadn't, allowing Percy to gain more ground in their internal battle. Syrreneth probably wasn't used to travelling in this manner either, but Percy wasn't sure the man's upper body had even entered the portal – he'd only managed to pull the elder's tail and the lower half of his torso so far, the Violet stubbornly holding on.

'Oh well... That's your loss,' Percy thought, willing the portal shut.

Kassorith landed face-first onto the metallic floor, his master's severed body falling on top of him amidst a rain of blood and spilled guts. They probably had plenty of powerful life mages in the Broken Fang Sect, but Percy didn't think Syrreneth would live long enough to employ their services. Even if the greedy elder somehow survived, he could, at most, tell his people about the parasitic alien who had possessed and kidnapped his disciple. He didn't really know anything more sensitive than that.

Overcoming his nausea, Kassorith was about to regain ownership of his body.

Percy brushed his hand over the amethyst emblem still pinned to his host's tunic, storing it in his seal as well. He didn't think he could enter the void tournament with it, so he'd only done this to spite Kassorith. He would have much rather emptied the contents of his host's spatial pin, grabbing himself a third set of ritual ingredients among other valuables, but he didn't have time for any of that.

'See you around, Kassorith. I hope you live long enough for me to kill you,' he said, finally allowing his host to evict him.

Following the cord back to Remior, he waited until he'd travelled far into the void before releasing his blessing, allowing its protection to wash over what was left of his ravaged wisp, calming the spectral

fiends down. It had been an unpleasant and arguably dangerous experience, but Percy was content with this outcome.

The only sour note was that Kassorith would probably survive. Despite Percy's efforts to rip his soul to pieces, he didn't doubt that Metatron had both the means and the intention to fix him. No way the titan would let go of a two-cored Blue with an extended lifespan, fresh out of a greater spring.

'Such a mess. I'll have to deal with it the next time I'm there…'

Chapter 467 – Machaon

'He's late. I hope he hasn't run into trouble,' Machaon thought.

Unfolding part of his domain, he blocked the gentle breeze disturbing the pond's surface, forcing the water to still. Using the clear liquid as a mirror, he examined his face, noticing a few undue creases on his forehead, along with a couple stray strands of blond hair that had somehow escaped from his ponytail.

He forced himself to calm down, combing his hair into shape with his fingers, before tying it again. Despite being thousands of years old, Machaon barely appeared middle-aged, thanks to his grade. His dishevelled looks wouldn't matter during the unimportant meeting he was about to have with his subordinate, but he couldn't afford to get in the habit of showing his worries on his expression, or people might start suspecting things they shouldn't.

Shaking his head, he strolled along the cobblestone path to kill the time until the Blue arrived.

The sprawling garden unfolded like a living tapestry, stretching for a few kilometres in every direction. Fragrant beds of lilies and tulips spilled over in splashes of colour, while ancient oaks and silver-barked birches rose like sentinels among the winding paths. Ivy clung stubbornly to carved stone arches, and moss softened the edges of marble benches where no one ever sat. Even the air carried a faint scent of blooming jasmine and damp earth, making the place feel more like a secluded paradise than a mere retreat.

More impressive still was the fact that this garden didn't belong to House Asclepius as a whole, but rather to Machaon himself. He'd first created it about two hundred years ago, and had taken it upon himself to maintain every step of his property. He regularly pruned hedges until their lines were razor-

straight, shaped cypresses into towering spires, scattered seeds into rich soil, and kept grass trimmed so evenly it resembled a velvet carpet. Blossoms were deadheaded before they could wither, and fallen leaves were swept away before they had a chance to decay. He even fed the fish in the pond personally.

People thought it was just another of his many hobbies – a way to pass the time when bored.

And… well… them thinking that was the whole point.

The truth was, Machaon despised this place. Despite how easy it was for him to force entire sections of the garden into shape with a single wave of his domain, the very idea of wasting even a minute of his day or a drop of his willpower to manicure a bunch of plants sickened him to no end. This was the kind of grunt work reserved for low-born commoners, not the leader of a Great House!

He'd grown tired decades ago of the exotic perfumes his occasional guests so generously praised. As for the incessant buzzing of the myriad bugs that had made his private kingdom their home – it only gave him the urge to burn the whole place down.

But he knew all of this was necessary.

He needed a place to himself. Somewhere no mortal on Remior would dare set foot without his explicit permission. A little corner far away from his family's assets, and an excuse to spend entire afternoons here undisturbed. That was one of the reasons he'd chosen a location surrounded by a dense forest, full of Orange and Yellow beasts.

That alone wasn't enough to stop everyone – obviously. Greens could still trek through the forest easily enough, and Blues could just fly over it, ignoring it entirely. That said, mages at such high grades were typically nobles who knew better than to get on Machaon's bad side.

Even the dumb animals had instincts sharp enough to stay outside a White's territory, though they did an amazing job keeping nosy or ignorant low-borns from approaching. As a bonus, Machaon enjoyed having an endless supply of Orange and Yellow cores readily available for his project.

'Such a pity they're no longer potent enough...'

Machaon noticed something on the horizon, flying towards him. A person, wearing House Asclepius's colours – the very subordinate he'd been expecting. The Blue was sitting cross-legged atop a stone sphere, almost as large as a small hut. A few palm-sized holes pierced the top of the construct, to allow the creature inside it to breathe.

Machaon didn't bother asking the man why he was late. He didn't care, nor would the Blue even remember their conversation afterwards. The earth mage leapt off the construct, landing in front of him as softly as he could. He was probably afraid that Machaon would be angry if he damaged the cobblestone path or stepped on the grass. Everyone thought that, since that was the impression Machaon had intentionally given them over the years.

In reality, he couldn't care less, but he needed them all to believe that he did. That it was the garden itself that was important to him – not what he had hidden inside it.

The Blue lowered the construct, though he didn't dare place it on the ground. He peeled off a few patches of stone near the middle, showing Machaon the sedated creature. It was some kind of armoured bear, about as large as an elephant. It looked alive and healthy, sleeping soundly as a Green core thrummed rhythmically in its sternum.

"I'll take it from here," Machaon said, forcing a gentle smile onto his face. It was a stupid little thing, but he'd learned a long time ago that treating his pawns with apparent kindness motivated them to work harder.

The Blue nodded, shattering the stone prison and launching the fragments far away into the distance, taking great care to ensure they'd land outside the garden. As for the beast, it didn't move a centimetre. It hovered about a metre off the ground, held up solely by Machaon's domain. The bulky animal felt no heavier than a feather against his potent willpower. Even if it woke from its deep slumber, it wouldn't be able to so much as twitch inside the invisible cage. Not that it would dare to go on a rampage under a White's gaze.

The Blue flew away without saying a word. He paused for a moment when he was a few hundred metres away, shuddering mid-flight. This was the normal reaction when an Oblivious Agent activated their bloodline, erasing their memories. Though that wasn't quite what had happened.

Machaon didn't even trust his most loyal subordinates when it came to his secret project. That was why he'd used his own bloodline – a unique variant of the Oblivious Agents' that nobody but him had ever been born with. It allowed him to erase someone else's memories, as long as they were a couple of

grades lower than him. It hadn't been that useful during his youth, but it had proven quite handy after his promotion to Violet and, later, White.

His bloodline normally required physical contact to work but using it on his Oblivious Agents was an exception, as they were several times more susceptible than the average person. By resonating with their own bloodline, Machaon could erase their memories from afar, and he could even control what he purged with far greater precision. That was one of the many reasons his predecessor had selected him to succeed him as the next patriarch of House Asclepius, all those years ago.

Regaining his bearings, the Blue resumed his flight, not even daring to glance back at the parcel he'd just delivered. Everything was in accordance with Machaon's instructions – the ones he'd chosen to leave intact in his subordinate's mind, at least.

Strictly speaking, this part of his plan wasn't nearly as sensitive as everything else. Powerful mages often liked to experiment with Green beasts, for one reason or another. Some used the creatures as sparring partners for themselves or their subordinates, while others might want to test a new spell on them.

Either way, it wasn't a crime to buy a couple of beasts from House Ypnos every week – it was barely a drop in the bucket compared to the hundreds of creatures the Great House sent into the Thirsty Valley regularly. Even if Machaon had commissioned the animals openly, nobody would have thought much of it. Still, the less the rest of Remior knew about his project, the lower the odds of something going wrong.

'Two centuries of this nonsense. And I've barely made any progress. I'll have to keep this charade up for another twenty thousand years, at least.'

He sighed. Machaon had known from the start that this would be a mind-numbingly long and extremely risky endeavour. If that wasn't troublesome enough, he also understood that a single Green beast every couple of days would grow insufficient in the near future, forcing him to purchase them more frequently, complicating matters further.

'It doesn't matter. It'll all be worth it if I succeed.'

Everyone on Remior looked up to him and the other Whites. Of course they did, given how rare it was for even a Yellow-born to reach this level. But for Machaon, it had never been enough.

Did they honestly expect him to live the rest of his life as a mortal, stuck at his current grade for tens of thousands of years, forever blocked by an invisible ceiling he could never overcome? To writhe in his bed every night, lamenting the singular promotion separating him from the apex of the Colour realm, and from everything that lay beyond it?

What a joke.

Machaon had decided a long time ago that he'd attain divinity, no matter what. Even if he had to burn his House to the ground in the process. Even if he had to bring all of Remior to ruin. The peasants, the lower Houses, his fellow Whites who called him "friend", and even those spoiled Green-borns lording their birthright over everyone…

They could all go fuck themselves.

Once he was certain he was alone, Machaon flew to the green labyrinth in the middle of the garden, the unconscious monstrosity hovering beside him. Sparing a sliver of willpower, he carefully lifted a huge square tile from a patch of unassuming hedge formations, complete with a carpet of grass and several metres of dirt and rocks.

Moving the suspended ground aside, he revealed a hidden entrance to a vast underground complex – one that stretched as far as the garden did. He entered it with the beast in tow, sealing the path behind him.

Chapter 468 – Felhald (1)

The sun had already set by the time Machaon left his garden. He flew toward his family's grand estate at a leisurely pace – leisurely for him, at least. Anyone below Violet would have found the rush of wind difficult to endure, yet Machaon barely registered it as it crashed against the thin film of willpower covering his body. He didn't have to expend even a drop of mana to travel at this ridiculous speed.

Taking a few pieces of paper from his pocket, he unfolded them, examining the wanted posters for the hundredth time this week. His eyes lingered on Percy's. 'Why couldn't you have been born a decade or two earlier?' he wondered, his lips curling into a bitter frown.

Had the Aurora Dew existed before he commenced the riskiest part of his operation, all of this could have been avoided. With an alternative path to godhood, Machaon wouldn't have needed to put his life on the line.

Officially, the Red-born's miraculous recipe was outside the Order's hands, but Machaon knew that was only a temporary situation. He understood the terrifying power that gods possessed better than most, having personally watched Hermes level a whole mountain a few thousand years ago – to open a more efficient route between two neighbouring provinces.

The only reason the boy was still alive and well, was because the deities willed it so. Sooner or later, they'd force the knowledge out of him or his mentor – assuming they hadn't done that already – spreading it to the noble Houses.

Depending on the Order's plans for Percy, that might happen next year or in a century. Either way, Machaon wasn't in a rush. Whatever the case, his promotion was still tens of thousands of years away. Besides, the Aurora Dew would get him there even faster than his current method. The priceless elixirs would be in short supply, no doubt, but Machaon was bound to get a share, as the patriarch of a Great House.

Suffice to say, Machaon would have tossed his whole plan in the gutter had he known about Percy and his brilliant invention before commencing his operation. He might have even offered to shelter the Red-born from his short-sighted enemies and looked for an amicable solution that would please everyone. Any price would have been worth it, for a chance to break past his limits and attain divinity.

'Such a shame… but it's too late to change course…'

Smuggling that thing out of the Fungal Spire had been a colossal risk. Machaon had only dared to do it because he'd thought it necessary. Trying to return it would be foolish. It would be even harder this time, considering how much it had changed over the years, or how many eyes were currently watching the Guild. Besides, even if Machaon somehow managed to patch everything up, he could never erase his crime. Should anyone learn about it, the gods would have his head on a pike the very same day.

As things stood, his best bet was to keep going as he had, hoping to advance before the consequences of his reckless actions caught up to him. If he got lucky, he might even be able to stack the Aurora Dew's benefits with his current approach, accelerating his plans several times over.

‘But that bitch is still a problem,’ he thought, flipping over to Nesha’s poster.

The girl had been a thorn in his side ever since her father sent her to the Alchemists’ Guild to protect her from their family’s destruction. Granted, none of Machaon’s subordinates knew anything incriminating, so even if a truth-seeker interrogated them, they wouldn’t learn much. That said, Machaon knew everything, and that was troublesome enough. He had to lie every other day to guard his secret – he lied about where he’d been, what he’d done, what had been gnawing at his mind, and why he’d made certain decisions.

As long as that cursed bloodline existed, it would only take a single slip-up around the wrong pair of ears to cost him everything. And tens of millennia was a long time to go without making a mistake.

Worse still, he didn’t really know that Nesha was the only one with the bloodline. On paper, she was the last surviving member of House Veritas, but it was entirely possible that one of the destroyed family’s promiscuous sons had gone around fathering nameless children in the past, spreading the Truthseeker bloodline like a disease.

Sadly, Machaon had no choice but to focus solely on the bloodline’s known bearers. This was one of the many reasons he preferred all his subordinates to have some other bloodline – it was the only way to be sure they lacked the means to see through his lies.

“I should have eradicated that House sooner,” he hissed through gritted teeth, an accidental surge of his willpower booming around him like thunder.

Knowing he was close to his House’s estate, Machaon took a deep breath to calm down.

Naturally, he’d considered finishing the job as soon as the girl made it to the Spire. Even during her stay in the Guild, he could have easily had her killed, but it would have been no less risky than letting her be.

No matter how clean he made her death, people would have wondered why she’d ended up dying so soon after her family’s destruction. They would have quickly figured out that nobody but Machaon could have facilitated both events, and they would have likely found it too coincidental that everything had transpired so soon after his brief tenure in the Guild.

After putting everything down, Machaon had ultimately decided to wait. Killing her a decade or two later would have been much safer, and it wasn't like he'd been in a rush – the teenage girl had been too weak and too ignorant to pose a threat at the time.

But even he couldn't have predicted that Nesha would end up collaborating with such a troublesome individual.

Having paid her close attention, Machaon had actually been the first person to learn about her involvement with the Aurora Dew. He'd been following her moves even before she reached out to his Oblivious Agents, so it hadn't been difficult to piece everything together.

At first, he'd thought that had been his lucky break. He could have ratted her out to the Order and allowed the gods to get rid of her for him. Even now, he didn't know whether or not it would have worked.

But what if it hadn't?

What if the Order had struck a deal with her instead? It would have made everything a hundred times worse! The gods would have kept her forever out of Machaon's reach. They might have even offered her the power and influence to investigate her family's destruction and enact her revenge, sealing his fate.

Suddenly, the idea of assassinating her in secret had sounded a whole lot more appealing again!

Unfortunately, her involvement with the Aurora Dew had complicated even that. Killing her at that time would have made it even more likely for the gods to follow the breadcrumbs to Machaon. In the end, he'd settled for what he'd thought had been the safest plan: to subtly manufacture Nesha's demise.

Machaon had allowed the girl and her – at the time unknown – accomplice to commence their shady operation and persist for a few months, incriminating themselves further. After the two had tied a noose around their own necks, Machaon had poured some oil in the conflict between Houses Talos and Antaeus, dropping the latter family an anonymous reminder that their rivals had been on the verge of producing a new Violet, thus escalating their war. In fact, he had even spotted some of House Talos's weaknesses, leaking them to their rivals to accelerate their downfall!

It had worked like a charm!

Mere weeks after his meddling, House Antaeus had backed their enemies to a corner, forcing them to adopt desperate measures. House Talos had volunteered the Aurora Dew to the Divine Root, setting a target on Nesha's back. Listening to Hermes's announcement that day, Machaon had thought he had succeeded – at least, he hadn't been able to see a safe path out of that mess for the girl. Even better, he'd accomplished his goal without anyone so much as suspecting his involvement!

It hadn't been perfect, since his Oblivious Agents had still been implicated. Acting under divine command, Theseus had inevitably knocked on Machaon's door, demanding the life of one of his underlings as punishment for their involvement. The audacious demand had stung Machaon's pride more than the loss of his subordinate had, but that had ultimately been a small price to pay to protect his interests. Being painted as a negligent – or even incompetent – leader was a thousand times better than the Root learning about the worst of his sins.

Overall, Machaon had been beside himself, right until he found out that the "mysterious culprits" had escaped from the Guild!

Chapter 469 – Felhald (2)

'If I'm lucky, she's buried in a ditch somewhere…' Machaon thought before shaking his head.

Technically, nobody had seen Nesha since before Percy's infiltration of the Thirsty Valley, so there was a slim chance that she was dead. Perhaps, one of the Red-born's enemies had managed to get to her before they got killed. Or, maybe, Percy himself had grown tired of the girl, feeding her to his monstrous crow to get rid of the dead weight.

But this was too important for Machaon to leave up to chance.

What if Nesha was still alive, hiding somewhere? What if she and Percy were still connected? The little monster was growing like a cancer! Just a decade ago, he'd been a powerless nobody, yet he had already turned into someone who slaughtered entire groups of Blues every other week!

Left unattended, this matter could easily blow up in Machaon's face sooner or later. The boy might grow strong enough to threaten him directly after a couple of centuries, and Nesha would likely keep digging up the past. To make matters worse, it was clear at this point that the gods had the mortals' backs,

despite their apparent apathy. Nothing else could explain why they would allow them to do as they pleased for so long.

'Deimos probably understands this too…'

Even so, the stubborn fool persisted. He'd been assigned to the Aurora Dew mission from the very start, and it didn't look like the gods or his superiors in the Divine Root had any intention of removing him from the task. Deimos had actually been the one to decide the bounties and coordinate the efforts to send many of the hunters after Percy.

Why he did that was anyone's guess.

Some believed that he wanted to get back at the Red-born for humiliating him time after time, while others thought that Deimos was motivated by his unresolved issues with his father – perhaps trying to prove a point to the gods who'd kept him in the dark all along.

Machaon didn't care which one it was.

He'd allowed the situation to play out, hoping one of the groups would get lucky and take the boy down. It would have been so much better if somebody else could do that and leave Machaon out of it entirely. Sadly, it had become painfully apparent by now that that wasn't going to happen. It had been months since Percy had been spotted last, and Machaon wouldn't be surprised if the boy could defeat most of the remaining teams by now. Sooner or later, Percy would be too powerful for Blues altogether, by which time it would all be over.

The Great Houses did have a few Violets available, but they couldn't just deploy them on a wild goose chase whenever they wanted. These were all notable individuals with more important jobs than hunting down a criminal. Machaon's window to act was shrinking rapidly.

'Nesha is still the main problem, but I've no idea where she is. Right now, my best bet is to get rid of him while I still can.'

With Percy out of the picture, the gods wouldn't give a damn about Nesha either. Machaon would be free to kill her with impunity the moment she resurfaced. At that point, people wouldn't even question

it, nor link it to her family's destruction anymore, because she was already a notorious fugitive. Even her knowledge of the Aurora Dew wasn't nearly as valuable now that the Root could extract it from Percy's mentor.

Reaching his family's estate, Machaon entered his office through the balcony on the third floor, before exiting into a long corridor. It was lit up by countless enchanted chandeliers, the polished crystals shining dimly over the wooden stands propping porcelain vases by the sides. The midnight blue carpet muffled the sound of Machaon's footsteps, as he headed toward the living quarters of his subordinates.

The walls were decorated with portraits of House Asclepius's former patriarchs – Machaon's predecessors. One day, his face would also end up there, but that would most likely happen after he retired, passing the mantle to his successor. By then, the other paintings would have been replaced dozens of times, as even the most potent enchantments couldn't preserve them for nearly that long.

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In some ways, being the leader of a Great House was the most enviable position on Remior.

Unlike the nobles of the lower Houses, Machaon didn't have to worry about being assassinated by his enemies. Leaving aside the fact that few could even challenge him, the Great Houses simply weren't involved in the political conflicts of their lessers, their authority fully solidified in the world's hierarchy.

In fact, it could be argued that even the Green-borns had it worse, since their lives were also at risk. The gods had no choice but to send the Holy Children on dangerous expeditions outside Remior, not only to facilitate their growth, but also because they needed their help to harvest resources from barren worlds.

Meanwhile, Machaon was one of exactly seven people on the planet who would get to enjoy the rare privilege of dying of old age, after living out his entire lifespan. Even after his death, his memory would survive, his likeness forever commemorated in these very walls – at least as long as House Asclepius existed.

'It doesn't matter. It's just not good enough,' he thought, not sparing the portraits another glance.

Forty thousand years was an unfathomably long amount of time, but it was ultimately little more than the blink of an eye to a god. And Machaon would have to spend some of it with a wrinkled face, suffering from his aching bones and crooked spine. And for what? What would be the point of enduring such a miserable existence, without a worthwhile purpose? What difference did it make if his name got passed down through the annals of history, long after his bones turned to dust?

No.

Machaon would live forever, or he'd die trying to.

Reaching his destination, he knocked on a wooden door. It opened, revealing a short man wearing nothing but a pair of trousers. His shoulder-length black hair was dishevelled, his differently coloured eyes – one green, the other blue – widening in surprise.

"Lord Asclepius! Forgive me, I wasn't expecting you!" he exclaimed, stepping back. "I'll put something on if you give me a second."

He was about to turn around when Machaon raised a hand to stop him. Felhald still used his domain to grab a loose-fitting tunic draped over a chair, giving Machaon a curious look as he tossed it on.

"I need you to do something," Machaon said, handing him the boy's poster.

"Oh? I didn't know you cared about the little monster," the Blue mused. "I'd assumed the bounty was pocket change for our House."

"Kill him. I don't care about the bird," Machaon replied, not bothering to explain. "Do it promptly and discreetly. If anyone asks, it was an accident. You tried to capture him alive, but it was too difficult."

"This…" Felhald frowned, not accepting the mission immediately. The reaction was somewhat atypical of the seasoned killer, but Machaon wasn't surprised.

"What? Are you afraid of him?"

Machaon wasn't looking down on Percy. He was perfectly aware of how dangerous the Red-born was. Still, Felhald wasn't a regular Blue. He was one of Remior's most renowned assassins, having personally slain more Blues than anyone else on the planet, including Percy. Violets and Whites couldn't be deployed easily, and the Divine Order had better things to do than sending their strongest Green-borns after a bunch of mortals.

Whenever a noble House wanted to prevent one of their rival families from getting a second Violet, it was people like Felhald that they hired to eliminate the competition – assuming they could afford House Asclepius's hefty prices, of course.

In fact, Felhald was the only one of his ilk who'd actually killed a couple of Violets before. Not that he was strong enough to face them in battle, but catching one off-guard wasn't impossible, given the right circumstances.

"To tell you the truth, I've been following the boy's achievements closely, and I don't think I'm the only one either – it's not every day Remior gives birth to a mage like him," the Blue admitted with a shrug. "I'm confident in taking him or his pet down separately, but together…?"

Machaon sighed in exasperation. "Pick three more Blues to go with you. I don't care who. Just tell them I want the boy dead, and I want it done yesterday. Don't speak a word to anyone else. Come back to get your memories of the mission erased the moment you're done. Do you understand?"

Would it work? Machaon didn't know. If the gods were keeping a close eye on Percy as he feared, they might step in at the last second to save him. Still, there was a chance. The Blue could easily execute one from afar, so he might succeed if he was fast enough – or if the deities had decided on a hands-off approach.

Regardless, Machaon had nothing to lose. Whether or not his subordinate failed, he had all the plausible deniability this time. After all, he was simply going after a criminal wanted by the Divine Root themselves. If anything, he was joining the party a year late, so nobody would suspect his eagerness or his motivations.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the veteran assassin grinned, his eyes gleaming with ruthless anticipation.

"Of course."

Chapter 470 – Return to Melodia

Percy clicked his tongue in annoyance upon sensing the disturbance in the cord. He'd been expecting the clone to return at some point – since he'd been gone for a while – but interrupting his work was always unpleasant.

'Oh well… I suppose I was going to scrap this batch anyway,' he thought, ripping the construct to shreds and letting it scatter in the wind behind Micky.

Technically, Percy could have stored the magical cloth away and resumed his efforts later – he'd even made sure to weave a lot of self-repairs into the material this time, so that he wouldn't have to worry about it degrading. However, he'd made several mistakes he didn't want to end up in the final version, so it was better to start over.

His joints made popping sounds as he rolled his shoulders and straightened his back. The air around him was colder than ice, thanks to his familiar constantly absorbing, converting and expelling ambient mana in his efforts to upgrade his boosting art. The frigid gas licked Percy's exposed skin, causing his hair to stand on end, though he didn't let it bother him too much, being used to it by now.

Leaning on the crow's back, Percy looked somewhere to their left, his eyes tracing the shaky cord to a faint glint in the distance. He patiently waited for the grey wisp to arrive, honestly not expecting much. The last three clones had returned empty-handed, after all, having spent months ignoring all the barren worlds and lesser springs in their path, holding out for something better – in accordance with his instructions.

'Okay, I guess one of them actually did something productive,' he corrected himself.

A few months back, a clone had finally picked up Sol's signal. Percy had obviously been elated to confirm that his friend on Melodia had survived the harrowing journey back to her homeland, after not hearing from her in years. Sadly, the clone had lacked the means to communicate the news to the main body, since they hadn't kept their cord in its empowered state, and he'd already flown too far from Remior.

Not that it had made that much of a difference. He would've had to return anyway, to swap out the contents of his spatial seal. After replacing the green mushrooms with Aurora Dew, the original had

created a new clone, equipping him with Zoris's ring and coating him in a protective layer of phantom mana, before sending him off.

Luckily, they'd acted fast enough for Sol's signal to still be available. The trip to Melodia had been uneventful, the clone breaking through the blockade of spectral fiends more easily than ever before, thanks to his blessing and higher grade.

Upon possessing the girl, Percy had been relieved to hear that not just she, but also Latt and Doh had made it home safely a few months earlier. She hadn't reached out immediately, because they'd been too busy defending their cities and coaching their people into learning the boosting art.

The Melodians' homeland was in hot water – regularly raided by hordes of hungry beasts – but the situation wasn't as dire as Percy had feared. They still had several years before their cities fell, so they had plenty of time to master Circulation, even without the assistance of the Elemental Source. The Refined spell would probably be enough to change the situation, or at least buy them even more time to upgrade it to the full Dance.

Percy would have loved to stay a bit longer for sightseeing and to study a new soul spell or Spectral Art, but he'd understood how swamped Sol was with responsibilities. In the end, they'd only focused on the most important things.

He'd passed her, Doh, and Latt enough Aurora Dew to get them all to the next grade. With two Green cores, three traits, and the Dance, Percy was confident the girl would be as powerful as a Blue the next time they met. As for Doh, he would probably become Melodia's first actual Blue.

If Percy was being honest with himself, giving Latt any elixirs wasn't the smartest allocation of the resources, since a Yellow advancing to Green would hardly make a difference. Even so, he hadn't wanted to skimp on a friend he'd spent months travelling and fighting with. Still, the Yellow-born had clearly understood the situation just as well, so he'd decided to pass his share to another Green-born, where it would arguably have a greater impact – to which Percy had no objection.

Strictly speaking, Sol's elixirs would have also done more good in the hands of two Green-borns, but both Percy and Doh had insisted that she used them herself. After all, the girl was Percy's only connection to Melodia – something that everyone knew was a lot more important than an extra fighter or two.

Percy would have loved to give them more resources, but his reserves were finite. He still had over fourteen years' worth of Aurora Dew for himself and Micky, but less than a third was brewed, and he hadn't been able to loot any lately, since his pursuers hadn't followed him to the ocean. Having no idea whether his plans with the wasp familiar would bear fruit, he couldn't afford to be too generous.

Percy and Sol hoped that her people would find their own source of stable beast mana eventually – once they had the strength to push back against the beast tide and explore their planet properly. For the time being, he'd shown her how to cleanse her cores both with and without the elixirs. The latter wasn't very meaningful for her or Doh, as chipping away at the impurities without beast mana would take a thousand years to get them to their second promotion, but it would allow the other Green-borns to reach Blue in a century if they didn't find something better in that time.

Finally, there was the ring.

The original agreement had been to have Sol absorb the blessing and return Zoris to the Mirror Lake the first chance she got, but the former god had surprised everyone with a new offer. He still had no interest in helping out the rest of the Melodians, but he'd decided to pass the blessing to both Doh and Latt. The two had initially rejected the god's kindness, but Zoris had insisted. Moreover, he'd even requested not to be returned to the Elemental Source after they were done.

'Are you sure?' Percy had asked. 'I thought you wanted to resume your research into rebuilding your body.'

'I do,' the ring wraith had replied, before elaborating, 'but I've since realized that silent contemplation for years on end might not be the best way to go about it. I think I'll have a better chance if I keep following you around.'

'I'm flattered by your trust, but I've no idea how to help you,' Percy had said.

Naturally, they'd discussed the possibility of turning Zoris into a familiar – like Percy had done to save Micky, or like he was planning to do to help Nephthys. However, they'd concluded that it wouldn't work. Unlike the others, Zoris wasn't just a disembodied soul – he'd been turned into a heaven-defying artifact through the power of a Decree, wielded by the very titan who had cast it. They had no idea whether damaging the ring would be safe, or whether Percy's bloodline could interact with it properly.

‘I know,’ Zoris had responded with a mental shrug. ‘I don’t expect anything unreasonable from you, nor am I in a hurry. But I’d love to stick by your side and watch your progress, if you’re fine with it. I’ve a hunch that I’ll have more opportunities in the future, once you grow stronger.’

Percy hadn’t said anything else, happy to follow the god’s wishes. Zoris had already done a lot for him, so he was more than willing to help however he could. He wouldn’t insult the former god by reminding him of the danger he was in as a wanted criminal, as he was certain Zoris had already considered everything carefully. Either way, their reunion would have to wait until his next visit to Melodia – perhaps even later, since the god had to pass the blessing to three people first.

With everything settled, he’d then returned to Remior.

There was a lot more he could have taught Sol – such as alchemy and runecrafting – and plenty that he wanted to learn from the Melodians, but he’d already given her enough to keep her busy for the foreseeable future. Anything else would have to wait until their situation stabilized.

They’d agreed to have Sol broadcast her signal once a week, however, so that Percy would only have to wait a few days at most if he needed to visit Melodia. On the flip side, the girl would reach out more frequently if she was the one in need, to let him know that something was wrong.

The wisp finally slammed into Percy’s soul, jolting him back to the present. His glowing eyes couldn’t help but widen in shock as he realized that his haul this time was far, far greater than he could have ever imagined…