Wanderer 491

Chapter 491: Devil (1)

‘What the hell is going on?!’ Deimos couldn’t help but ask himself, halting his barrage upon realizing that his spells weren’t going to get through the cyclone, a bad premonition forming at the corner of his mind.

The Red-born hadn’t moved a single step, to the point that it wasn’t even clear whether he was still conscious in there. The grey maelstrom protecting him was weird enough, but Deimos was more perplexed by the strange melody permeating the battlefield. Leaving aside the fact that he couldn’t even pinpoint where the crows were cawing from, he knew that nothing should have been audible inside his domain without his explicit permission!

Peering past the dark gales spiralling around his opponent, he tried to make sense of the changes. Torrents of mana rushed to fuel the enchantments on Percy’s equipment, his cloak appearing to have reached a new equilibrium.

Two distinct mana types seemed to be at play – the same ones that the human and his pet had wielded separately – though they now flowed in perfect sync, like two parts of a greater whole. Deimos couldn’t name either of them, though one most closely resembled ice mana – if he ignored how freely it shifted between solid, liquid and gas. This affinity appeared to have a destructive effect on the construct, constantly distorting its weave as its sibling – some variant of soul mana, surely – fought to preserve the cloak’s shape.

The cloth coiling around Percy resembled a beggar’s rags more than anything a noble would wear. The cloak was longer than before, covering almost every square centimetre of the Red-born’s body, its ends fluttering wildly in the wind. The occasional strip of silk tore itself off to join the blizzard, as more fabric grew to replace it. At this point, it was honestly difficult to tell where the construct ended and the frigid storm began.

Regardless, Percy had remained perfectly still, making Deimos question whether the young man was even alive.

‘The fool! Did he freeze himself to death with his own spell?’ he wondered with a faint smirk, finding the notion amusing.

Still, he knew he couldn't leave this place without making sure. It would only bring him trouble later. Walking closer to the edge of the cyclone, Deimos looked deep into the dark depths of his opponent's hood – the one spot on his body that wasn't entirely covered. He was trying to discern whether there was any flesh left on the Red-born's face, when something happened that made him leap back in fright.

Two pale orbs looked right back at Deimos, their piercing gaze stabbing into his very soul!

The maelstrom exploded outwards in a tide of cold air, forcing Deimos to shield himself with a layer of willpower. The chill sent a tingle down his spine, the frigid wind licking his skin like a devil's tongue. Swallowing hard, he scarcely noticed that all the colourful motes for hundreds of metres had suddenly turned grey, gathering around the cloaked figure like a swarm of forsaken fireflies!

The Red-born raised his one remaining arm, a small shard shooting toward his palm from the ground nearby, growing into a complete scythe by the time it landed in his grip. The sight made Deimos's heart race with terror, though he forced himself to calm down.

"I've no idea how you managed to create a barrier powerful enough to block my magic, but you should have kept playing dead inside your little cyclone until I grew bored and left!" he shouted, aiming his palm at his opponent and firing a dozen powerful blasts. This time, he was going to make sure the bastard died, to prevent any nasty surprises down the line.

His eyes widened the very next instant, however, as the Red-born's hand moved with such speed that his weapon turned into a blur, slicing and smashing through each of the deadly projectiles with chilling ease.

'Impossible!' Deimos thought.

Seeing and reacting to the rapid barrage would have been shocking enough, but those feats admittedly fell within the realm of Percy's known abilities. What was far less believable was that a single one of his constructs could withstand so much force without breaking.

During their earlier battle, the Red-born had struggled to stop his spells. Of course, Deimos still had no clue what had happened to his opponent, but Percy's grade hadn't really changed. Even though he was somehow wielding his crow's cores, his constructs were still mostly permeated by dense, Yellow mana, except for a few Green lines branching out inside his cloak. And those didn't even extend to the

weapons in the first place. Clearly, Percy hadn't had the chance to upgrade the enchantments on the scythe either, so it just didn't make sense that it could bear the strain.

Racking his brain, Deimos could only think of a single explanation, though it wasn't that much easier to accept. Then again, it would also explain how the strange melody had pierced through his willpower, its eerie tune echoing through the battlefield.

'A domain?!'

If the Red-born had truly awakened one, it wasn't the entry-level domain that Blues acquired upon advancing either. This one was clearly no weaker than Deimos's own!

Realizing that things had just taken a turn for the worse, Deimos unleashed a lot more mana, pelting the Red-born with a hail of transparent projectiles, each deadlier than the last. The scythe continued to hold, though its wielder finally got pushed back by the relentless barrage, allowing Deimos to exhale in relief. Evidently, his opponent's unexpected power-up wasn't without its limits.

Sadly, his joy was short-lived. The cloaked figure moved again, lifting what was left of his severed arm, a rush of gloomy motes sinking into the empty sleeve. Bursting out of the opening, a skeletal hand shimmering in a grey light emerged, a layer of frost filling the gaps between the bones with artificial flesh.

Before Deimos even registered what was happening, another shard shot toward the Red-born, a second scythe settling into his grip. The cloaked figure danced with eerie grace, stepping, pivoting and spinning atop the frozen ground as he steadily advanced.

Gritting his teeth, Deimos backtracked to give himself more space, pumping mana out of his channels until his arms hurt, desperately trying to keep his inhuman opponent at bay.

The Red-born wasn't nearly done yet, it seemed. Each of his sleeves split in two, the top halves soon regenerating as the lower halves coiled around a new pair of crystalline arms holding just as many scythes.

The cloaked figure darted toward Deimos, the missiles of compressed sound barely slowing him down. Shafts rolled freely along the Red-born's now-four limbs, pivoting around his elbows, a flurry of grey crescents shredding through every projectile heading his way.

Deimos keenly noticed that his opponent's skill had shot through the roof the moment his new arms took shape. The difference this time had been more than quantitative – it felt as if the Red-born's fighting style had always been meant for a person with four-hands!

Either way, Deimos didn't have time to worry about that.

Seeing that his opponent's scythes were mere metres away from slicing through his very soul, he gritted his teeth, expending his mana lavishly to shoot dozens of blasts at once, hoping for an opening. No matter how impregnable the Red-born's defences seemed, Deimos knew that a single hit would be enough to turn the bastard's fragile body into a pile of goo!

Sure enough, the cloaked figure managed to parry most of the blows, but his scythes could only be in so many places at once. Deimos grinned as he watched one of the projectiles fly past the constructs, about to dig into Percy's hood, to burst his skull open like a rotten watermelon!

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl as something unexpected happened.

At the last moment, the fabric at the top and bottom of the Red-born's hood shifted. Almost as if it had a mind of its own, it turned into a pair of pointed tips, clamping down on the missile like an elongated beak, scattering it into a bunch of harmless motes!

The smile froze on Deimos's face as he finally accepted that he wasn't going to win the brawl. Stomping hard, he released another hefty chunk of mana, propelling himself upwards. The next moment, he found himself hovering hundreds of metres off the ground, looking down at his opponent.

"I admit that I don't stand a chance on solid ground!" he yelled, projecting his voice through his domain – as much of it as was left, anyway, since the massive bubble of willpower had shrunk greatly, gnawed down to a mere fraction of its size by the raging blizzard. Regardless, Deimos wasn't one to give up so easily. "I can't help but wonder whether you can move this well without proper footing!"

Silently accepting his challenge, the cloaked figure jumped after him, opening his beak wide. Torrents of ambient mana spiralled into his dark throat, causing his shape to swell. Grey silk expanded over his frame, rippling over his arms like a river to form a pair of giant wings.

Before long, the Red-born was no smaller than an elephant, resembling a crow more than he did a human. In fact, he looked just like his dead pet, save for the different texture and colour of his body.

But it didn't seem like he was done yet!

The cloak continued to expand, soon reaching the size of a small house. The sight reminded Deimos of the Blue wasps he'd seen on the fifth level of the Fungal Spire, though the Red-born only kept growing. He didn't stop until he was as large as what Deimos could only describe as a Violet beast – though he'd obviously never actually seen one!

Flapping its humongous wings, the monstrous crow crossed the gap in an instant, its beak opening wide around him, large enough to swallow a man whole!

Deimos ignored the horrid sight of its cavernous throat, and the rows upon rows of curved fangs pointing at him – each as big as a scythe's blade. He barely managed to escape to the side as the beak clamped shut with enough force to send a ripple down the bird's silken flesh, broken fangs shooting in every direction. Deimos hadn't escaped unscathed, however.

Glancing down, he saw that his left leg had been severed just above the ankle, a layer of grey frost sealing the wound as it slowly spread toward his knee, a wave of numbness reaching all the way to his thigh.

Still, Deimos ignored the discomfort, seizing the opportunity to land a devastating blow on his opponent. Rolling and sliding down the abomination's body, he clung to one of the creases near its chest to arrest his momentum, shooting a new barrage of powerful missiles.

He aimed them at the Green star thrumming somewhere in the construct's depths. The three Yellow cores were impossible to locate amidst the ocean of same-coloured mana, but this one constantly betrayed its location. As long as he shattered it, the Red-born's spell was bound to come undone!

Things didn’t go to plan. At first, the blows barely left a dent on the cloth, forcing Deimos to put more effort behind each one. Eventually, he managed to tear a few holes into the silk, but the substance was regenerating too fast for him to ever reach his target. And it appeared he was out of time already.

The giant crow rolled once through the air, shaking him off. A colossal wing wider than a building slammed into Deimos like a meteor, snapping most of his ribs in half and causing his right arm to bend the wrong way.

A mouthful of red snow escaped his lips, and then another as he collided against something hard, leaving several deep craters covered in cracks while skidding across the ground.

By the time Deimos came to a halt, his whole body was a mess, though it didn’t look like his opponent had any intention of letting him catch his breath. Lifting his gaze, he watched the colossal crow dive toward him, the tips of its sharp talons glinting with fury!

Chapter 492: Devil (2)

Deimos rolled to the side just in time to avoid getting flattened like a bug beneath the giant talon, thick plates of stone flipping as the earth split under the crow’s bulk. A second talon descended almost immediately after, though he luckily managed to avoid it too, the shockwave sending him flying away.

Opening its beak wide, the bird drew even more ambient mana. Its body couldn’t grow any larger, so it swelled into a sphere instead, before exploding. A murder of regular-sized crows emerged from within, flying furiously toward Deimos.

Pushing himself to his remaining foot, he used his domain to force his bones back in place, wincing through the pain as he braced himself for the incoming flock. Firing countless projectiles, he destroyed as many of the artificial creatures as he could, the rest dodging the blasts as they prepared for a second attack.

A few lodged themselves into the ground, their figures bursting open to reveal a series of cylindrical shafts. The constructs grew into full-sized scythes as the silk flowed around them, rolling into humanoid shapes that promptly lifted their weapons off the ground.

The cloaked phantoms danced around Deimos, their shrill cries grating at his ears as the crows above shadowed their movements, surrounding him. His domain shrunk further as the savage tune intensified, his very willpower turning brittle and shattering like cheap glass.

Not caring about the domain, Deimos focused on the countless constructs about to rip his soul to shreds. He knew he couldn't possibly stop or dodge each of them separately – especially since they appeared far sturdier than they had during his earlier battle with Percy.

Left with no other choice, he clapped his hands together, emptying more than half of his reserves, a powerful shockwave expanding outwards like thunder to rip the phantoms apart.

His troubles had only just begun, however.

The shards flew toward the last of the cloaked figures – who Deimos could only assume was their master. The Red-born lifted his one good arm, the storm converging into his hand.

The pieces attached themselves to one another, held in place by frost and enchanted silk, a new construct slowly taking shape. It was a massive weapon, its shaft thicker than a tree's trunk, stretching out for over a hundred metres.

Unable to hold it in his hand, the Red-born wrapped his elbow around it, a series of long blades sprouting along its length. He'd probably intended them to curve into neat crescents, but their actual shape ended up jagged. Each resembled a rough shard of ice more than a scythe's blade, though there was no doubt as to their sharpness, making the whole structure look like an oversized cleaver.

An outside observer might have burst out laughing at the comical sight of the regular-sized human trying to wield what could only be described as the ugliest pole on Remior.

Deimos swallowed hard, knowing better.

Without warning, the Red-born swung his deceptively practical weapon, the construct appearing entirely weightless as it completed its arc in half a heartbeat.

Deimos barely managed to hop high enough to avoid getting cleanly bisected, though a grey crescent still sliced through his knees before expanding outwards, the grey motes parting as a new layer of frost rippled across the battlefield.

Not a drop of blood leaked from his stumps, chips of brittle flesh flaking off one after the other. Deimos wasn't given the chance to so much as study his debilitating injury, the Red-born already swinging his monstrous weapon again, this time vertically.

Unlike before, Deimos managed to avoid getting hit, watching with horror as the cleaver sliced the ground open into a deep ravine, revealing countless tunnels covered in colourful crystals. Like withering flowers, the vibrant minerals soon lost their hues, a gloomy layer of grey sealing the caverns as waterfalls of hissing mist poured down the bottomless chasm.

Realizing that his opponent was about to attack a third time, Deimos unleashed every drop of mana he had left, parrying the blow at the last instant. Surviving the execution by the skin of his teeth, he was sent sliding backwards, digging a deep trench in the process.

The collision had thankfully damaged the cleaver too, though its wielder didn't appear very concerned. Tossing the broken weapon aside, the cloaked figure formed another in his hand – just a regular scythe this time.

Walking toward Deimos, the Red-born dragged its tip along the ground, the grating noise causing Deimos's hair to stand on end. The pale orbs within the hood still shone brightly, their frigid gaze never peeling off Deimos's frame for even a second as he finally realized that he was going to die here.

As strange as it seemed, this was the one outcome that he hadn't really considered over the past few years. He understood that Percy was growing at a ridiculous pace, of course, and that the gods were probably deeply invested in his development. Even so, none of that had mattered to him that much.

Ever since his advancement to Violet, he thought that he still had decades – if not centuries – before the Red-born caught up to him. By then, the situation would certainly be settled – one way or another. Deimos hadn't been that worried about the gods' retaliation either. After all, he hadn't broken any rules.

He was under no obligation to disclose his new grade to anyone, and it wasn't his fault that his superiors wanted to throw Blues at Percy by the dozens to foster his growth, without so much as informing them of the boy's importance.

If there had been a few things that had kept him awake at night, they had nothing to do with his survival. He'd stressed over whether Percy would foolishly return to the Guild and fall into his trap, whether Orin would spill the beans on the Aurora Dew and give him the means to attain divinity, and whether Hermes would finally acknowledge his talent after he personally defeated Remior's reigning prodigy.

As for his safety?

Until this moment, Deimos had never even bothered to question it.

Yet, watching the very face of death approach, his eyes widened with horror as he finally came to terms with what he'd done.

He'd driven Percy out of the Alchemists' Guild and his family's mansion… dragged his name through the mud… sent countless bounty hunters after his head… captured his grandfather and locked him up in a cell… stripped his mentor's status and humiliated him publicly… threatened his loved ones… mocked him… and even killed his beloved crow in front of his eyes, all the while laughing and joking about it!

Beads of sweat froze on Deimos's forehead as his executioner stopped just a step away, looming over him like the grim reaper. Not a hint of mercy could be found in his cold gaze – and why would it?

Deimos had slapped the devil's cheek time after time, spat into his eyes and then had the gall to invite him over for tea! And now… said devil was here to extract his payment!

Swinging his scythe, the Red-born allowed the crescent blade to phase through the ground, stabbing through Deimos's chest from behind. A curved edge tore through his flesh and soul both, lifting him a few centimetres off the ground as an indescribable chill spread out from the wound.

There was no pain – just numbness – darkness seeping through the corners of his vision. He scarcely registered his core falling apart, its pieces hungrily devoured by the blade. A layer of grey frost encased it, reshaping the construct into a tall stalagmite.

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Tearing the shaft off the impaled corpse, they left Deimos's lifeless body on display. A warning, to anyone foolish enough to provoke somebody they shouldn't…

A deep rumble shook the earth, as the Status finally broke its silence.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Secret Art: Soul Symphony – Masterful + Secret Art: Soul-crushing Needle – Masterful + Spectral Art: Phantomwoven Cloak – Masterful + Wild Art: Carnival of the Savage Gods – Masterful + Wild Art: Symbel of the Savage Gods – Masterful -> …]

[…Ultimate Art: Symphony of a Dead Winter – Extreme!]

Falling to their knees, they couldn't help but raise an eyebrow, though they were unfortunately way too tired to make sense of the message right now. Besides, the Status wasn't even done.

[Error! Unable to identify user! Calibrating Phoebe's Decree…]

At the same time, the tremor intensified, countless shapes seemingly moving underground. Much of the noise appeared to emanate from the bottomless ravine a few dozen metres away, cracking sounds permeating the area – almost as if an entire army of monsters was crawling over the crystalline walls, rapidly climbing to the surface.

Wholly uninterested in their predicament, Phoebe's Decree continued.

[Calibration complete.]

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new aspect: Percival!]

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new aspect: Mictlantecuhtli!]

They felt something worm its way to their chest, ripping itself from the tattered robe. A dark object landed on the frozen ground with a crisp ting. It was a bird. Whether it was its size or colour, it looked no different from a mundane crow. However, its grey body was clearly still made of ice – a Green and a Yellow core pulsing inside its tiny frame.

More notifications flashed.

[Congratulations! Your mutations have merged…]

[Congratulations! Your domain has…]

They couldn't focus on the text long enough to read, collapsing onto the ground as the last dregs of power left their muscles. Their eyelids drooped as the marching sounds drew nearer. They knew they had to get the hell out of here before it was too late, but they couldn't even stand.

The last thing they registered before their eyes fell shut was the sight of countless figures surrounding them. A forest of antennas, carapaces, mandibles and membranous wings of all shapes and sizes enveloped their bodies, dragging them away…

[END OF BOOK 4: LEGEND OF THE THIRD HERO]

[END OF THE WINTER SAGA]

Chapter 493: Identity

Once again, they found themselves at a strange place. At first, they thought this was another alien world – perhaps one of their clones had claimed a new body.

They soon realized that this couldn't be the case. After all, they didn't remember the journey to this planet, nor the process of stitching their host's soul. Besides, the scenery was all wrong. It was way too

fantastical to be anything but a figment of their imagination. And… too familiar to be anything but a dream forged out of their memories.

In front of them, a vast plain stretched as far as the eye could see, covered in snow. Howling winds sang like before, though the Symphony wasn't nearly as loud as it had been during the fight. Turning around, they saw something that didn't fit here at all – a dense, sunlit forest, the canopies of its aged pines swaying rhythmically under a much softer breeze, whistling sounds emanating from their hollow cones.

To their right, a large building stood under a red sky. It was downright colossal – some kind of stadium. They'd only seen it once in their lives – at least from the outside, though they'd spent a whole lot more time living inside it. They wished to examine it from up close, and this strange world obliged.

Suddenly, they found themselves standing in the centre of an arena, blood-soaked sand crunching beneath their feet, with the occasional shard of bone sticking out and failing to stab into their calloused soles. The acrid stench of iron filled their nostrils, stinging the back of their throat.

A crimson star shone dimly overhead – painting a stark contrast against the dark sky above the snowy plain or the bright sunlight spilling through the branches of the forest they'd just left behind.

Rows upon rows of stands rose around the arena, though they failed to spot another soul. Even so, they could almost hear the crowd's cheering, jeering and booing, the buzzing cacophony of their treacherous people having long been seared into their memory.

Walking across the sand, they recalled many of the vicious opponents they'd faced in this gods-forsaken place. Six-pawed monstrosities, packs of smaller beasts and… even fellow gladiators, left with no choice but to fight each other to the death to please their cruel captors.

Feeling done with this hellish pit for good, they walked toward one of the imposing gates, wishing to pay their old cell a brief visit. Their time there had been no less unpleasant, but they had spent the vast majority of their life sitting on the cold, damp floor, playing their handcrafted kik'lit…

Their bottom-right palm barely pressed against the metallic door, causing their surroundings to shift again. At least, the strange dream was kind enough to provide them with shortcuts whenever they wanted to move, sparing them from having to walk.

Finding themselves back in their cell as requested, they brushed their fingers along the bars. They distinctly remembered that the material had felt a little smoother when they first got shoved into their lifelong prison, though it had gradually grown quite rough after accumulating rust for decades.

Walking to the back of the cell, they stepped into the murky puddle, not particularly bothered by the filthy water splashing beneath their feet. Reaching into the darkness, they picked up a half-rotten chunk of raw meat from their most recent kill – or rather, a creature they'd killed a long time ago – pecking a chunk off for nostalgia's sake.

Their time in the coliseum was arguably among their least favourite memories. Even so, they were glad that they'd finally recalled it all. No matter how bad it had been, this was a part of who they were. Not to mention, it served as a grim reminder of the ghastly fate that would continue to be inflicted upon their people, until they managed to free their conquered world from its oppressors.

For a moment, they considered returning to the other places. The dark side of Huehue… the Whistling Woods… the Fungal Spire… the Grisly Bog… the Thirsty Valley… the Vault of Magic… Felmara… Melodia… Gallimus… Thess'kala… Remior's ocean…

But there was no point. There was nothing else that they needed to recall. If anything, they remembered way too much now. It was quite bizarre, actually, how well they could picture even the most minute details of their past – even things normally too small and unimportant for a regular person to retain.

Even weirder was how they could remember multiple different "pasts", all of them converging into a single "present". They could still tell with ease which of their memories had come from Micky the crow, Micky the gladiator, or Percival Avalon – though the distinction felt almost meaningless right now.

None of it was more or less important than the rest.

Remior was their home, but so was Huehue. Their wings and talons were as familiar as their four hands, their mouth and nose, or their Sovereign's Eye. Elaine and Baldy were their family, but so were their parents and sister.

As a matter of fact, they'd recalled a few details that might lead to their missing father. While their mother and sister had been murdered before their very eyes – thus leaving no room for hope – the man's fate had still been unknown, at least according to the previous memories they'd recovered.

Thankfully, they now knew that they had tried to inquire about that person several times during their long stay in the coliseum. They'd begged the wardens to ask around, feeding them the occasional morsel of information as a reward for their victories – another reason to keep living their hopeless life.

Unfortunately, what they'd been able to gather was rather limited.

Whether their captors had been too lazy to look into the matter properly, or simply happy to watch them squirm, they'd likely never know. Either way, the only thing they'd learned was that the man had indeed been captured alive and taken to a different coliseum.

This wasn't much to go on – for all they knew, their father could have died a thousand times over after fighting for his life every single day, for the past however-many decades. Even if he was alive, they'd never deluded themselves into thinking that they would see each other again.

Then, Mixcoatl had killed them, and the rest was history.

'Well, at least there's a chance now,' they thought, before shaking their head.

First, they needed to make sense of their current situation.

Figuring out what had happened wasn't very difficult. Obviously, their souls had fused while fighting Deimos. Their – the crow's – soul had flown back to their – Percy's – body upon their death, bringing about this unusual state. It wasn't ideal, since this was the very thing they'd tried so hard to prevent from the moment they began equipping the familiar with a clone.

Then again, it wasn't necessarily a bad outcome. It had given them the strength to take that bastard down, and it had even helped them recall the rest of their missing memories.

It didn't even feel that bad. In fact, they felt better than ever before, their minds seemingly working in perfect sync to peer through a layer of fog that they'd never even noticed was there. What they were currently experiencing most certainly wasn't the result of an advancement, though in many ways, it felt better than one!

They were sure that their current condition came with several more advantages and disadvantages that they would slowly discover over the coming days, but that was an issue for later.

'Let's start by waking up from this dream…'

In theory, they still had two bodies to return to. They clearly remembered the crow's still figure splitting off from their Cloak at the end of the battle. Whether they could access either or even both of the bodies at once remained to be seen.

All of that was under the assumption that they were still alive, of course. They hadn't forgotten about the army of wasps carrying them away, the feeling of the encroaching bugs still giving them goosebumps. However, they didn't think that the creatures had hurt them. For one, dead people shouldn't be having dreams.

'We'll try to occupy the human body first,' they decided.

It was the one most likely to be functional, since it was their bloodline that had made everything possible in the first place. On top of that, it was also the body they had defaulted to after killing Deimos, as well as the most convenient to keep if they were forced to choose.

Wishing themselves out seemed to do the trick. It took a while, but the world around them shook, the cell crumbling to dust before the rest of the coliseum followed. A mountain of debris landed on their head, though it didn't crush them. It merely trapped them in a dark ocean of sand, unable to breathe or even twitch a muscle. Thankfully, the suffocating feeling only lasted a moment or two. Then, they found themselves resting on solid ground again.

This time, they were almost certain it was actual ground too – they were back in the real world.

Lifting their head, they examined their new surroundings. They were inside a vast cavern, its surfaces covered with colourful minerals, the air thick with glowing motes. Clearly, they were back inside the hive, far deeper than any of their wasp clones had ventured before. Probably near the Starry Queen's chamber too, judging from the size of everything.

Besides them, there was only a single other object in the room. No. Not an object. A body! It was still alive, its chest heaving up and down as soft breaths escaped its lips, though the creature was clearly asleep.

It sported a humanoid shape, though it was far larger than it had any right to be – it was downright colossal! In fact, the sleeping giant appeared to be as tall as a Blue beast, despite the fact that it couldn't be anything but a sapient!

Finding the discrepancy difficult to accept, they scanned their slumbering roommate closely, gasping upon recognizing his features. Their features! This was actually their own body – Percy's!

Only now did they realize that they'd actually woken up in the crow's body by accident. It wasn't their human body that had grown larger – it was just the bird that had shrunk after the fight, for some reason. And it had been a while since the last time they'd seen a regular human from such a vantage point.

'Not a great sign,' they thought, clicking their beak in irritation over their failure.

It should still be possible to access the other body though. They just had to perform a few more tests.

Regardless, the space they were in clearly wasn't as massive as they'd initially thought, though it was still wide enough for an actual Blue beast to crawl through with ease. A Violet might fit too, though they'd never actually seen one.

Scanning the cavern, they failed to spot any trace of the giant wasps. Perhaps they were giving the creatures too much credit, but it almost felt as if they'd intentionally left them here alone to rest peacefully, until they were ready to reach out.

They still had no idea what the magical insects wanted from them, though the Starry Queen had clearly shown great interest in them during their previous escape from the hive. Thankfully, she appeared more

courteous towards them than expected. Arguably more than they deserved too, considering how many of her offspring they'd slain over the years…

In any case, they could deal with the bugs later. Right now, they had to figure out how to control their bodies properly, and to go over the most recent changes in their Status.

Also, they had to stop referring to themselves as "they".

Chapter 494: Ethereal entity

At first, they weren't sure how they were meant to navigate between their two bodies, though they guessed that the most obvious solution would involve fiddling with their cord – assuming that they still had one. Searching for the connection in its usual spot on their chest, they soon found something that made them gasp in shock.

'It feels so much wider than before!'

Granted, describing their link in physical terms had never been a simple task. It was impossible to put an exact number on its diameter or cross-section, because the cord didn't exist in the physical plane. In fact, it didn't even pass through the much fuzzier soul plane that tended to greatly distort time and space.

Instead, it seemed to exist inside a third, even more esoteric dimension – one exclusive to Percy, his clones and his familiar. Whether the Clone bloodline had created this private realm or merely allowed them to tap into it, they didn't know. Either way, it was the reason they could communicate and send mana across vast distances – provided that they could keep the connection open from that far away.

In theory, they could have tried to gauge the width of their cords indirectly, by estimating the amount of mana that they allowed through, but even that had always been quite challenging. After all, mana could be compressed countless times in its unmanifested state. A Red and a demigod both stored their entire reserves inside a tiny orb in their sternum, yet mages at the higher grades could easily expand their mana enough to conjure enormous boulders or fill entire lakes with water.

After obtaining the Sorcerer's Eye and upgrading their Secret Art to Refined, they had technically gained the ability to perceive the cords directly but, again, what their eyes had shown them about the cords' dimensions had never been that trustworthy. As a result, they'd only used the information to better

orient themselves, and pinpoint the direction and distance to their clones – not the transmission process itself.

Consequently, the best that Percy and Micky had ever been able to do had been to compare one type of cord to another. The original connection was the one they used most commonly, since it was the least expensive to maintain. Everything beyond that required either an additional clone or a lot of effort.

The empowered cords granted by Soul Resonance allowed them to transmit more mana and from farther away, but activating and maintaining them was a hassle. Then, there was the two-way connection Percy and Micky had relied on over the past couple of years, after upgrading their Secret Art to Soul Harmony.

It had doubled the cord's capacity and even allowed them to keep it open passively, by twisting two of the empowered connections together and creating a permanent loop of soul mana between them, though that had come at the cost of permanently occupying a second cord.

That said, they currently had access to a connection that appeared to eclipse even that. It was probably best described as a vast tunnel, rather than a cord. More importantly, it felt like they could push more than just mana or information through it.

'Come to think of it, isn't our soul already stretching inside?'

That had never happened before. As intimate as Percy and Micky's connection had been, their souls had always been separate. Right now, that was no longer the case. They had clearly fused completely, their joint existence now spanning both bodies.

'If that's the case, why is only the crow awake?' they wondered. This was especially glaring, considering that they shouldn't have lost the Insomnia trait.

Playing around some more, they soon realized that they could shift their soul better than most living beings could. This was something that they hadn't been able to do in their original bodies – this was closer to how the clones tended to interact with their hosts.

In addition to this increased flexibility, the crow body felt rather cramped – almost like a disproportional fraction of their soul had folded up inside it. Another chunk was resting inside the cord, suspended in the strange dimension, with only the tiniest wisp lingering in their human vessel.

'It's probably a good thing that there's some of it left, otherwise one of our bodies might have died in its sleep,' they realized, swallowing hard.

If they had to describe this situation to somebody, they'd use the analogy of a person resting on a king-sized bed by themselves. There was simply too much room, and they'd accidentally rolled too far toward one side without noticing, creating this imbalance. So… what if they tried to return to the middle?

Figuring out how to do that wasn't very difficult.

They already had plenty of experience of doing similar things with their clones. Leaning into the connection, they felt their soul practically fall inside a deep well, soon reaching a much larger vessel and expanding freely on the other side. They had to stop themselves before they rolled too far in the other direction. The whole process felt natural – just a function built into their new existence by default.

If there was one thing they didn't appreciate, it was how painful it was to move their soul across the cord. This had nothing to do with their transformation itself, but rather the injuries they'd accumulated during the battle. Many spots felt stiff and riddled with cracks – almost frostbitten, if souls could even experience that. The internal friction worsened their wounds, causing them to wince and grit their beak.

Evidently, the state that they had entered while fighting Deimos had greatly strained their soul and bodies. It didn't look like they would be able to do that very often, and recovering afterwards wasn't trivial either.

Even so, they persisted, until more senses fed into their mind: the hard, uneven ground pressing against the human's back, a second set of soft breaths that was oddly in sync with the first one, and three new limbs that they could move around. Sitting up with difficulty, they opened their eyes, scanning the room until their gaze landed on the tiny crow standing on the ground next to them.

'How bizarre…'

They could see themselves through two pairs of eyes. One saw the grey bird, its icy body now small enough to fit on their head, the other seeing a giant human towering over them like a tall tree. The man's clothes were in tatters, his dark, unkempt hair falling messily over his shoulders as he scratched his bushy beard in contemplation.

They were both of them!

Obviously, Percy and Micky had shared senses many times before, so this wasn't entirely new. Still, it was quite different from their previous experiences. It felt less like two people borrowing each other's eyes, and more like a single individual rubbing his hands together, feeling each limb through the other.

In some ways, this wasn't as comfortable as what they had felt during the fight. Their incarnation as the cloaked figure had felt more right – closer to how they were meant to be. Sadly, their current grades appeared to limit how long they could stay fully fused. Either that, or it was simply something that no living being was capable of maintaining forever.

The good news was that they knew how tomerge into that form again if they wanted to, but it was obviously better to save that as a trump card. At the very least, they had to mend their injuries before they even considered going all out again. Besides, having two bodies came with its own advantages, so they didn't feel like complaining.

Regardless, the spell they had registered during the battle clearly hadn't ended. It had merely gone dormant, the Symphony of a Dead Winter still faintly echoing in the deepest recesses of their soul, patiently building up towards its next crescendo…

'I guess this is who we are now. Can we even be considered a beast or a sapient anymore?' they couldn't help but wonder.

A case could certainly be made against that. There probably wasn't even a name for the type of entity they had become. Their souls hadn't merely merged – they had also grown in the process, evolving into something new. Something that their physical vessels struggled to contain by themselves. A lot of their soul would inevitably continue to exist inside the ethereal cord. Perhaps, that was their true self, and their bodies were little more than a pair of gloves now – the ethereal entity's only means of interacting with the real world.

Was it the crow's beast affinity that had turned them into this? Perhaps recovering so many memories – too many memories to fit in a single head – had played a role, as well as the colossal amount of mana they'd absorbed through their boosting arts to facilitate the transformation.

They sighed. At the end of the day, it didn't matter.

Paying more attention to their bodies, they soon noticed something else. 'Well, it looks like our cores and mutations are still constrained to their original bodies for the most part.'

The human's eyes now glowed in a dull grey colour, sporting slit pupils like before. In addition to their regular sight, they could perceive the crow's much lower temperature compared to its surroundings in the form of a dark silhouette in a slightly brighter background. A smaller grey silhouette flowed inside it. This amorphous flame clearly pertained to their soul, or at least the part they had left inside the bird.

A Green and Yellow orb shone in the crow's sternum and abdomen respectively, the corresponding mana channels branching out to the rest of its body like before. The Yellow ones were a little difficult to spot, however, since the whole structure was now made out of mana of the same grade. Finally, a thick, ink-like substance permeated the bird, indicating the willpower coursing through the mana.

The bird's vision was a lot less detailed than the human's. It couldn't register temperature or willpower at all. It could spot the grey silhouette flowing inside "Percy" through its passive Soul Vision, but it wasn't as defined. As for the human's cores, "Micky" had to manually tap into his Mana Sense to locate them.

'I guess we'll have to fix our missing arm the good old way too,' they thought, their human lips curling into a frown as their avian eyes lingered on the stump.

The crystalline appendages that they had forged during the fight clearly hadn't survived their separation. It wasn't that strange, considering that they'd been fuelled by a mutation that the human body no longer had access to.

Getting up, they stretched their remaining limbs with both bodies, noticing how easily they could control them simultaneously. At least, their mind appeared to have kept up with the transformation, meaning that it wouldn't take them very long to adjust to their new reality.

They hadn’t missed the pyramid still slowly crumbling inside the human’s head, of course, and there was also the Starry Queen that they had to deal with, but they wanted a few more questions answered before worrying about any of that.

Turning to their trusty Status, they braced themselves for what was certainly bound to be quite the overhaul…

Chapter 495: New name?

The Status opened before their eyes, the page now far longer than ever before, and full of surprises.

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The Lone Wanderer

Aspects:

Mana cores:

Domain:

Bloodline:

Blessing:

Mutations:

Spectral traits:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

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The human body creased its brow as soon as its gaze landed on the first line.

‘The Lone Wanderer? Is that what we’re called now?’

Perhaps it wasn’t so strange that their Status no longer deemed it fit to refer to them as “Percival Avalon” or “Mictlantecuhtli”, as neither of those names was very accurate anymore. Even so, it felt a bit intrusive of Phoebe’s Decree to pick a new name for them.

Then again, they had to admit that this monicker was rather fitting. They’d always been a “Wanderer” after all – that was their defining feature, and the main source of their abilities. As for the other part… that, they felt more inclined to protest, as being called out as a loner wasn’t the most pleasant thing. Still, it wasn’t that inaccurate either, considering how their souls had fused into one, or how averse Percy had generally been to socializing. They really might end up as a “Lone Wanderer” if they kept hanging out with nobody but their familiars, and those all eventually fused with them.

Which brought another issue to question.

‘How will the Status even handle Nephthys? And do we still want to turn her into a familiar at this point?’ they couldn’t help but wonder.

They imagined that placing her in a wasp egg wouldn’t turn her into one of those new aspects directly – just a regular familiar. After all, Percy and Micky had gone through so many hoops to end up in this situation. It might not even be possible for another familiar to merge so deeply with them without the right combination of affinities or mutations.

But there were still several things they didn't know. Would their Status create a new list of familiars to place the former goddess in? Or would it just treat her the same way it had treated the crow in the past, giving her an extension of their own Status that she couldn't even access by herself?

Either way, they weren't sure they wanted to risk inviting another person to occupy such a permanent spot in their soul. That was not to say that they regretted what had happened to them, but there was a huge difference between Percy and Micky – who had considered each other more than brothers for decades – merging like this, and them doing so with a complete stranger. Turning Nephthys into a regular familiar was already a huge deal, let alone something even more intimate and downright irreversible…

'Well, we did promise to help her and her people. It would be shitty of us to let them die out of selfishness. Besides, we'll probably have plenty of time to vet her properly and ask her opinion before doing anything crazier.'

Pushing the questions about aspects and familiars to the back of their mind for now, they moved on to the mana cores. All four of the organs were grouped up, though their Status had weirdly chosen to stick their initials next to the numbers, listing them as 1P, 2P, 1M and 2M – instead of just numbering them one to four.

This was clearly intentional, and actually made a lot of sense if they thought about it.

The situation with their new cores was different from the ones granted by the Moirais' Decree. While they could wield all four of them at once, each only provided its passive benefits to the corresponding body. At the very least, they hadn't noticed any increase in their physical strength or lifespans.

The last part was especially disappointing, in fact.

They didn't look forward to watching one of their bodies die of old age before the other. Then again, the plan had always been for both of them to attain divinity anyway, so they would have done their best to prevent that from happening regardless. Even if they failed and one of their bodies died in the end, both of their souls would hopefully survive in the other, so it wasn't all gloom and doom.

Next, there were the changes to their domain.

There was a lot to consider, and it was clear that their domain had played a decisive role in their victory against Deimos. They'd already had a somewhat clear idea of how Obatala's Approval tended to affect various bodies across different grades, and they had a few guesses as to what exactly had happened to them during the fight.

Even so, studying their domain wasn't a priority right now. They'd rather focus on understanding their bodies first, before moving on to other pressing things.

That inevitably brought them to the next three sections: their bloodline, their mutations, and their spectral traits – which should probably be considered together. As they had previously surmised, the first two only appeared to affect their original bodies, though the Status had listed them together, not bothering to mark them like the cores.

The human body was the only one that could stir the bloodline, though both souls would inevitably be part of their future clones, since there was no separating them at this point.

'Hmm… does that mean that our capacity has increased?' they wondered.

Two souls should mean more cords, right? Especially since Micky had been at Green, bringing a stronger soul into the mix. If it worked as they hoped, they might even be able to use the extra cords to create more familiars and aspects, thus gaining even more cords in the process!

Their hearts couldn't help but skip a couple of beats as they realized how easily that could be abused into giving them an infinite army of aspects, familiars and clones!

Searching inward, they tried to feel how many connections they still had available. In the past, they hadn't been able to tell. Percy had needed to blindly create clones until he passed that limit, growing dizzy and losing control of his body. However, he'd slowly developed a sense for his capacity over the past couple of years – an inevitable consequence of juggling so many connections daily.

Their expressions sagged as soon as it became clear that they could only create four more clones – the same as right before their fusion. Evidently, not only had Micky's soul not added to their capacity, they hadn't even recovered the cord used up by the clone in the bird's body.

‘It isn’t very surprising though… it was probably consumed to facilitate our evolution,’ they reasoned.

It would certainly explain how their cord had been able to widen so much, how their soul had grown to this extent, and how their mental capacity had kept up with the other changes.

‘So much for infinite clones…’

They sighed, lamenting the lost opportunity. Clearly, only the part of their soul originating from Percy had contributed to their capacity, so they’d have to wait over a century for more cords. They didn’t know why exactly that was, but the most logical explanation was that it had something to do with the way the soul affinity interacted with the bloodline in the human body.

Maybe that was for the best though. Had it been otherwise, they would have failed to resist the temptation of merging with a thousand others, slowly losing themselves in the process.

‘What about the spectral traits then? Can we absorb another fiend now?’

The fiends had nothing to do with the Clone bloodline, so there was a chance that both souls would affect their capacity. At the very least, they could tell that their traits worked with both bodies, unlike the bloodline that could only be activated by one of them.

The fact that the crow’s plumage had turned grey was further proof that the blessing of permanence now stretched to their entire soul – not just the part inside the human body – the Soul Predator mutation being the likely culprit for manifesting that colour onto the feathers.

‘Let’s wait until we get the ring back before trying anything stupid,’ they decided.

They had no clue how to test their capacity for traits by themselves, and it was too risky to attempt absorbing a fiend before being sure. Of course, Zoris probably wouldn’t be able to answer that question either, but he might be able to help them check.

Focusing on their mutations again, they noted that two of them had remained unchanged. Or rather, the entries had, though the colour of their Sovereign’s Eye had shifted again during the transformation. The

change appeared to be purely cosmetic, but it was one they welcomed, as the grey hue resembled Percy's original eyes more closely. It would put other humans at ease and allow them to stand out less in a crowd.

As for their Greater Thess'kalan Physique – it hadn't changed in any way, but that didn't mean that it hadn't played a decisive role in the previous battle. In fact, it was probably one of the main reasons they'd even managed to survive the transformation.

If it hadn't been for the increased toughness of their body and their elevated resistance to cold temperatures, they might have really died from their own spell – just like that bastard, Deimos, had told them.

Finally, there was the elephant-sized beast in the cavern – the new mutation.

'Dead Winter Elemental, huh?'

This one was obviously the only mutation affecting the crow's body. Be it through its description or just simple deduction, it was clear that it represented the fusion of the bird's previous four mutations.

It had inherited all their individual benefits and likely strengthened each of them further. Not only did it allow the crow to regenerate from almost any injury and sustain its beast core like before, it was apparently capable of a bunch of additional things now.

'What does it mean by "shapeshift"?'

Chapter 496: Dead Winter Elemental

'We'll need a lot of mana to test the new mutation's effects,' they realized.

Taking a few deep breaths, they gathered the colourful motes in the cavern closer, the particles taking on a grey hue as they transformed into dancing flames, long ribbons and a violent snowstorm. The elements seeped in and out of their pores, filling their channels with mana and their muscles with strength.

Soon, it became clear that they could still access the original forms of their boosting arts – the Carnival and the Symbel of the Savage Gods – even without going all out. In fact, it appeared that they had a lot more flexibility right now than before their fusion!

The human and the crow had each cleared and tempered sets of pure, soul, ice, water and air channels. The first could only contain variants of pure mana, so the best resource to fill them up with was naturally phantom mana. The last three networks could contain soul-freezing ice, while the soul channels could handle either of the fused affinities.

In the past, Percy and Micky had only been able to convert ambient mana to the types they had the correct cores for, but it now seemed like they could create whatever resources they needed on either end of their existence, without having to constantly pass their mana back and forth.

'Well, it's not perfect…'

Sadly, the crow body was the only one with beast channels, as the affinity couldn't exist anywhere outside its circulatory system. On top of that, the human body still had a lower resistance to cold than the bird, though it had certainly climbed by another step after the fusion. Finally, the exact ratio of mana that each body could wield was further capped by the cores they possessed, allowing the human to circulate more phantom mana and the crow to fill up on soul-freezing ice.

Still, they would certainly have a lot more options during a fight.

Satisfied with their findings, they moved on to other tasks. The human body poured phantom mana into the self-repair enchantments on his robes. The ice mana had distorted the construct greatly earlier, leaving "Percy" almost naked.

The tattered rags drank the grey flames greedily, soon expanding to cover the rest of the body. The once-chaotic weave grew orderly again, the clothes turning tidier as the faded enchantments suddenly became readable.

At the same time, they used some of the mana to mend their injured soul. The frostbitten patches refused to thaw at first, making them realize that the backlash of their new spell wasn't so easy to reverse.

They should be able to carve out the smaller wounds entirely, regrowing those parts of their soul from scratch. However, they'd have to slowly thaw and heal the larger of the stiff regions properly, which would inevitably take a few days.

'Better get on it then. The sooner we're no longer a complete mess, the sooner we'll be able to place Nephthys inside an egg…'

While the human body was busy pouring phantom mana into their Cloak and soul, the crow took control of the soul-freezing ice, trying to activate the new mutation. Luckily, it didn't seem to require much effort, the crystalline flesh responding almost immediately to their wishes.

The tiny bird absorbed the grey blizzard like a sponge, growing rapidly. Within seconds, it was as tall as a human, its talons turning into feet, its wings into hands, and its beak into an exact replica of Percy's face!

The two bodies looked at each other, feeling like they were staring inside a three-dimensional mirror – albeit one that had replaced tanned skin with ice, dark hair with glossy strands, and even regrown their missing limb. Lifting its artificial hands, the not-really-a-crow body clenched and unclenched its fists, realizing they felt no different from a human's!

But they didn't stop there.

Drawing even more mana, they transformed again. They grew a few centimetres taller, a new beak forming on their head as their torso turned slightly bulkier, a second pair of arms sprouting right beneath the first. This was the original Micky's appearance!

Punching empty space a few times, they listened to the booming shockwaves their fists released, taking a moment to appreciate the feeling of the air splitting against their skin, leaving no question as to the sheer power their icy muscles now packed.

'Okay… we look like the original Micky, but this is definitely a much stronger body…'

While Micky had spent a lot of time fighting in the coliseum, he had still ultimately been a Yellow sapient, while the new body was technically a beast with a Green and a Yellow core, even if it didn't currently look the part.

Absorbing more mana, they shapeshifted one final time, ditching their hands for wings again, turning back into a crow. Only, this time they were as large as an elephant – much like Micky had been right before their fusion. They did try to grow further still, but that destabilized their body, the ice falling apart to reveal a regular-sized crow.

'That's probably the largest body those two cores can support by themselves. We'll likely need both bodies working together to form a construct as big as the one we used against Deimos,' they realized.

Over the next few minutes, they performed some additional tests, playing around with their different forms while exploring their limits. Switching between them was relatively quick and painless, though they struggled to transform into anything outside the four shapes they were familiar with.

It should be possible, but it would probably take a lot of practice before they got used to anything else. A project for the future, but not a priority, since the choices they had available already covered most of their needs.

The small crow was the least conspicuous form, as well as the one that would consume the least stamina. Of course, all four shapes could be maintained indefinitely, but the most efficient one would allow a greater ratio of their meals to be directed into the beast core's advancement, probably shrinking the time to Blue greatly. At the very least, they fully expected the ice body to spend most of its time in that shape moving forward.

The giant bird was the fastest and strongest – physically at least. However, the sapient forms could borrow and wield the same tools as the human body, using the Cloak and Harvesters to reproduce most of the Carnival's Parades. In many ways, they should be even stronger than the human, though the reduced phantom mana would limit the maximum number of constructs they could wield, and the lack of the Sovereign's Eye would prevent them from predicting their opponents' moves.

More importantly, those two forms should be capable of performing the finer arts like alchemy or runecrafting, and even interacting with others like regular people! Unfortunately, their icy texture would make them stand out, so blending in a crowd wouldn't be easy, but the crow body's endless flexibility was bound to serve them greatly down the line.

‘Well, it’s probably more accurate to call it the “elemental body” now…’

Shaking the pointless thoughts out of their heads, they then moved to the other sections. The alchemic principles had remained entirely untouched, and so had the Decrees.

Funnily enough, the Moirais’ Decree now affected them twice, even though its entry mentioned nothing of the sort. Most people in the universe would likely lose their minds if they knew that somebody had found a way to not only steal, but completely abuse, one of the most powerful Decrees in existence.

There was no longer any question as to whether Phoebe’s or Obatala’s Decrees affected the human or the elemental, since they only had a single Status shared between them. Iapetus’s Decree only worked on “Percy”, however, as did the mutation part of Ea’s Gift.

The biggest question mark in the entire section was Metatron’s Decree. They imagined that both bodies should have access to it – because Micky had been able to use it before, with the clone’s help – but that wasn’t what bothered them.

‘What the hell happened back there? Why didn’t it activate when we needed it to?’

Strictly speaking, it was probably a good thing that they’d failed to escape to the Vault. While their current situation had its downsides, there was plenty to be happy about. Falling into the titan’s hands would have certainly been a lot worse.

However, that was irrelevant.

The problem was that whoever had prevented them from opening the portal couldn’t have possibly predicted their fusion. They’d clearly been willing to let at least Micky – and probably Percy too – to die.

As for who it was?

Well, it had to have been one of Remior's gods. Probably Phoebe herself, as they couldn't imagine anyone else interfering with a Decree like that. They'd long suspected that the titaness had set her eyes on them, of course, though they still had no idea what she wanted.

They had obviously brought lots of valuable techniques and treasures to Remior, so it wasn't that strange that the Order had decided not to directly join the Root's manhunt, but that didn't explain why they had even allowed their subordinates to continue chasing them, or why Phoebe had suddenly been willing to let them die.

'Well, we can't really blame her for not wanting us to open a portal to the Vault… Still, she could have intervened in a way that didn't completely screw us over!'

Alas, the gods' whims were sadly not something they could do anything about right now. Shrugging, they decided to move on to the thing they'd deliberately left for last. Opening their Status, they read the spell section once more, their eyes landing on what was arguably the most important of the new entries – as well as the cause of everything else that had happened to them:

The new spell.

Chapter 497 – Extreme

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Spells:

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'Ultimate Art… well, that sure answers what happens when a spell requires both a bloodline, a mutation, and a spectral trait to work,' they thought, the human body scratching the back of its head. 'The name is a bit tacky though.'

Regardless, they finally knew what the tier above Masterful was called, yet that only created more questions.

Had this so-called “Extreme” tier always existed, or was it something their Status had come up with on the spot? Normally, Masterful spells were meant for Violets and Whites, so who were Extreme spells even meant for? Just demigods? Or perhaps, none but the most talented mortals? If not them, surely a god would be capable of casting something similar, right?

Either way, one thing was for certain.

If it hadn’t been for the pretty unique circumstances of the previous battle, they would have probably never merged their spells like this – not even after training for a thousand years. And they weren’t just being modest or pessimistic either.

While Percy and Micky had done a great job developing so many Masterful spells with such low grades and at such a young age, it was painfully apparent that their new technique was on a whole other level from any of its components.

It was the result of five Masterful spells fusing – four of Percy’s and one of Micky’s – each of which had been an extremely intricate piece of magic in and of itself. Many of them had involved several moving parts of their own, with three having been close to the very top of the tier in the first place.

It wasn’t that strange that their fusion warranted a new classification, but getting all the components to fit together seamlessly would have been an impossible challenge for a regular person. They’d only succeeded because they’d somehow managed to get three minds to collaborate perfectly on the task. In fact, they wouldn’t be surprised if they’d consumed a lot of Wiseman’s Murmurs in the process too.

‘Hmmm… too much was going on for us to notice but, come to think of it, hasn’t the influx of ideas grown a bit quieter now? We haven’t bled the pyramid dry, have we?’

The plan had always been to leave some of the resource for the wasp familiar, to give Nephthys a helping hand as she began her new life. It was the least the goddess deserved, considering that the Murmurs had come from her in the first place.

Hopefully, it was just their imagination, and the only reason the substance wasn’t making its presence known at the moment was because they weren’t practicing their magic. Not that they were planning to do that anytime soon, though.

They'd already fused half of their spells into the Symphony of a Dead Winter – closer to a hundred percent of their arsenal, actually, if they excluded all the auxiliary spells that had little to do with combat. Consequently, they had no idea how to continue raising their strength.

'We could aim for some incremental improvements, but we'll probably experience diminishing returns moving forward,' they realized.

They should be able to hone their magiscript further the next time they visited the Vault, and they might also be able to come up with a more efficient form of affinity fusion that involved ice, soul and pure mana. They could also try using Green trollsfury tattoos, or even working other variants of potions into their kit. Finally, learning to wield their domain better might help, among other things.

However, all of those projects were relatively minor – at least compared to everything they'd already incorporated into the spell. It would take several time-consuming improvements for too little gain.

Not that killing a powerful Violet with only a bunch of Yellow and Green cores was anything to scoff at, but the Lone Wanderer suddenly found himself with fewer promising projects to work on than usual.

This was perhaps the perfect time to shift their attention to more peaceful ventures. Growing any stronger in their current grades was a tall order, so their best bet would be to sprint toward their next promotions – be they natural or artificial. Of course, their clones were bound to find more interesting things to bring back at some point, opening new doors for them, but that wasn't something they could plan for.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

'We should try to settle down anyway. Right now, the priority is giving Nephthys a body, followed by figuring out the situation in the Guild and the rest of Remior.'

Weirdly enough, they had already grown stronger than most of the Violets leading the noble Houses. If they excluded the Green-borns in the Divine Order, there might be fewer than a hundred mortals in the world capable of beating them in single combat.

'Well… "single" if they don't call us out for cheating…'

With Deimos out of the picture and their enemies having learned some tough lessons recently, they might not encounter too much resistance if they tried to free Baldy and Orin.

Then, they could look for some remote corner to hide in for the next few centuries, focusing on the new familiar's growth, alchemy, magiscript, cleansing their cores, and exploring the universe.

'Sounds like a plan. All this fighting has gotten pretty cumbersome anyway…'

Heaving out a tired breath, they closed their Status, having finished going over everything. Their transformation had changed a lot, but they felt that they now had a decent grasp on their new reality.

Over the next couple of hours, they poured their efforts into mending as much of the soul damage as possible. They weren't going to recover completely in such a short time, but they wanted to at least be able to carve out a chunk of their soul without fainting, to fashion the familiar out of – assuming that they managed to get an egg from the Starry Queen.

On top of that, they hoped that they would be able to activate their new spell in a pinch. They still had no idea what the ruler of the magical hive wanted from them, but there was always a chance that things would devolve to violence. Activating the Symphony before they fully recovered wouldn't be pleasant, but they would need its power to break out of the underground prison if the worst came to pass.

As they worked on thawing out their soul, they took some time to consider a different issue.

'How are we going to interact with other people, moving forward?'

Ideally, they should make an effort to think of themselves as "Percy" and "Micky" whenever possible, and to try and behave as two separate individuals – if not inside their heads, then at least when interacting with others.

Keeping the façade up wouldn't be easy, as they clearly defaulted to referring to themselves as "they". Pretending to talk to one another would be the equivalent of a regular person developing a split personality on purpose, making the whole thing as silly as it was impractical.

Still, as annoying as it sounded, they knew they had to do something to put their friends and family at ease. Conforming to basic social norms and expectations would likely serve them better in the long run. And who knew? Maybe they'd find a way to separate their minds and stuff them back into their respective bodies one day – if only whenever it was more convenient than being fused.

'It's settled then. I'll be Percy again, and you'll be Micky,' the human body said, getting a nod back. It already felt weird, if not downright cringeworthy, but they'd have to get used to it.

As soon as they were ready, they finally stepped out of the cavern and into the only tunnel leading to the next one. The elemental body – no. Micky – had shifted back to Percy's form, ready to fight if necessary. This was the best form to use right now, for several reasons.

For one, he wouldn't be able to fly in such a cramped space, so neither the large nor the small birds would be any useful here. The four-armed shape might be a little stronger than the human one, but there was another problem with it.

Walking ahead, Percy tore a strip from his Cloak, tossing it to his "companion". The latter poured some phantom mana to regenerate it, soon donning an identical copy. Unfortunately, his other form was too burly for it and had a couple of arms too many. If necessary, he could wear a slightly distorted version, but it was better to use one that fit him properly for now and worry about weaving a new set of clothes later.

As they passed through the wide tunnel, they couldn't help but gawk over the colourful minerals lining the walls and ceiling. Among them, they even spotted a material they recognized – a dark vein with hundreds of tiny dots glittering over its glossy surface.

'Obsidian marble!'

It could be used to craft long-lasting spatial amulets, though they didn't really need any more of those at the moment. Even so, they were tempted to snatch a few crystals and ores of each type to experiment on later.

In the past, Percy might have thought twice about disturbing the environment inside the precious hive – if not out of fear of breaking the law, then out of respect for its importance in Remior's survival. That

ship had largely sailed, of course, considering how much he'd disturbed this place already. Besides, grabbing a few rocks wouldn't really make a difference.

'Not right now,' he thought, shaking his head.

Robbing the place when they were about to meet its ruler might not be a great idea.

Approaching the end of the corridor, they felt the ground rumble beneath their feet, a constant buzzing sound growing louder by the second. Swallowing hard, they pressed on, knowing that there was no avoiding what was to come.

Reaching the exit, they found themselves inside a room several times larger than the last one. The deposits scattered across the stone surfaces shone even more brightly than those in the tunnel. Countless exits led out of the cavern, each wide enough for at least a Blue bug to easily crawl through, with many being even bigger than that.

The air was thick with dancing motes, though the particles were constantly disturbed by the thousands of insects of all shapes and sizes crawling out of one tunnel and into another. The Red-cored Starry Drones were as big as a man's fist, while the Orange-cored Starry Workers and the Yellow-cored Starry Soldiers were as large as foxes or humans, respectively.

There were plenty of Green-cored Starry Knights too, each the size of an elephant – reminding Percy and Micky of the monstrosity that had nearly claimed their life the last time they'd found themselves inside the hive. They didn't see any of the Blue beasts around, however. There probably weren't that many of them in the colony to begin with, or they simply didn't have a reason to regularly wander through its tunnels.

Either way, Percy and Micky weren't paying the scenery or the smaller creatures any attention. How could they, when they struggled to peel their eyes from the behemoth standing smack in the middle of the room, staring right back at them?

Chapter 498 – Starry Queen

One thing was for certain: after today, Percy would never look at a bug the same way again.

The creature standing before him towered over the largest buildings he'd seen on Remior, save perhaps for Phoebe's temple at the foot of the Oracle Mountain, or the headquarters of the noble Houses. The gargantuan insect was nearly thirty metres tall, and over twice as long from antennae to stinger. Her membranous wings were folded neatly behind her back, though Percy wouldn't be surprised if they could stretch even wider than her body.

Overall, her appearance was rather similar to that of the smaller bugs: a black, glossy carapace sprinkled with colourful dots that resembled stars – the very reason for the name of their species. However, there were a few differences that set the Queen apart from her offspring, outside of her size.

A golden watermark pattern covered her entire exoskeleton, rippling through and around the stars, making the creature's chitinous exterior resemble a galactic nebula. Percy guessed that the Queen owed her strange markings to either her royal lineage or her Violet grade. Or, perhaps, the two things were one and the same, but he knew even less about the hive's innerworkings to tell with certainty.

Another feature – which the smaller bugs might actually share with their mother, but which Percy hadn't noticed in the past – was a series of jagged ends lining the sides of the wasp's limbs. Each was sharp enough to slice a person in half for the crime of merely walking into it by accident. Not that the Queen needed the dagger-like protrusions to kill someone – her limbs were already wide enough to flatten a grown human with a single stomp.

Of course, Percy's eyes captured a few more details than his "companion's". He could clearly follow the bright Violet lines spreading through the Queen's circulatory system, her soul burning beneath her flesh like a silver inferno as an ocean of ink-coloured willpower rolled and tussled violently within her frame, barely contained.

'I have to give her credit for suppressing her domain, at least. She's more polite than most humans I've met,' he noted.

Curiously, Percy didn't feel very tense under the creature's scrutinizing gaze. Perhaps he should have been more wary of the monster, considering how much larger and stronger it was than the Starry Knight that had nearly claimed his life a few years prior. Then again, his confidence wasn't unfounded either, given how much stronger he and Micky had grown since their frantic escape from the Guild.

Even so, the elemental body stepped closer to the human, ready to meld into his Cloak at a moment's notice. If the colossal insect was weaker than Deimos, they might be able to take it down without going all out, but fighting their way out of the hive was bound to be even harder.

“Greetings, Your Majesty,” Percy said, bowing his head slightly. He had no idea whether the creature could even understand him, let alone appreciate the gesture, but he genuinely felt like reciprocating the Queen’s excellent manners. “I must thank you for your hospitality, and for giving us the time and space to recover before our meeting.”

No response.

The wasp didn’t so much as twitch. She was still looking at them unflinchingly, their figures reflected countless times across her compound eyes. The other bugs stopped moving at once, however, halting their incessant buzzing and plunging the chamber into silence so deep that one could hear a pin drop.

Yet, one of the creatures did move, a shape slowly approaching by the corner of Micky’s vision. It was an elephant-sized bug – a Starry Knight – its rhythmic steps echoing through the vast chamber. Walking in front of Percy, it stopped right between him and its mother.

Percy had no idea what the insects were up to, so he just watched with curiosity as the Queen raised her forelimb a few metres above the crystalline floor of the cavern. Without the slightest warning or hesitation, she slammed the colossal limb down at her subject, sending a tremor through the hive as she crushed the entire lower half of the bug’s body into goo.

The gruesome sight cause Percy’s eyes to widen with shock. On one hand, the Queen’s blatant disregard for the life of her own descendant wasn’t necessarily a bad thing – it likely meant that she didn’t care as much about all the other insects he and Micky had slain in the past.

On the other hand, it was a clear indication that she wouldn’t give a damn about a human’s life either. The only reason they were still alive was because she wanted something from them, so they had to make sure the negotiations reached an amicable conclusion if they wanted to leave this place peacefully.

‘What did she do that for, though?’ Percy wondered, a frown forming on his face as the Starry Queen made no further move. It wasn’t until a few seconds later, when she slowly pushed the still-twitching body of the dying Starry Knight toward him that he realized what she wanted. ‘Don’t tell me… does she expect me to put a clone in this thing?’

As cruel of a move as it was, he had to admit that it was chillingly practical. Violet beasts were certainly intelligent enough to communicate with sapients, but it didn't look like the Queen possessed any serviceable vocal cords, nor did the mental field that she used to convey her commands to her subjects seem to extend to anyone else.

In other words, the simplest way to speak to Percy would be to have him enter one of the insects' bodies, tapping into their network. And… judging by how thoroughly she'd injured the creature, she'd clearly figured out the basics of how Percy's bloodline worked too.

Swallowing hard – mostly due to the Queen's callousness than genuine fear – Percy ignored her offer entirely, walking around the Knight. Not only did he have no intention of sharing the wasp's agony just to chat with its abusive mother, he also had a much better way available.

Approaching the Violet beast, he cautiously lifted his arm, placing his palm against the pillar-like forelimb gently, so as to not startle its owner. The chitinous exoskeleton was still covered in green mucus – which was rather unsettling. Percy had to put genuine effort to avoid gagging, unwilling to offend the Queen so soon.

Pushing his soul to the very surface of his skin, he used a sliver of grey mana to attach it to the Queen's. Percy had already upgraded his Soul-to-soul spell to Refined, but he could obviously still access the original, less intrusive version of his Spectral Art. The giant wasp shuddered for the briefest of instants as their souls connected, though she didn't pull back.

'You don't have to sacrifice your subjects just to talk to me,' Percy said, as Micky tossed the spasming remains another glance.

'A small loss,' a feminine voice responded, cold as ice. 'I agree that your method is more convenient though,' she added.

'May I know why you've gone to so much trouble to bring us here alive?' Percy asked, cutting to the chase.

A faint chuckle echoed in his soul before the creature responded. 'Bold of you to ask me that, after breaking into my home without permission, slaughtering thousands of my subjects, and then even

having the gall to return. Maybe I just wanted to gut you two personally and take my time savouring your innards.'

Percy shrugged, not intimidated by the creature's empty threats in the slightest. The Queen had to know how risky it would be to attack him. Besides, he doubted that she'd gone through such lengths just to threaten them. Still, he opted to reply a little more diplomatically than that, to hopefully ease the tension in the room.

'I do apologize for our transgressions. It was never our intention to stir such a mess last time. We merely wanted to pass through the tunnels to escape from the Guild. We would have left peacefully had your children allowed us.'

The Queen clicked her mandibles in annoyance, though it sounded more like a couple of boulders grinding against one another.

'And what about today's mess? Or did you forget about that chasm you've carved into my hive? My children are still trying to fill up the hole as we speak, but that strange ice of yours isn't making their job easy…'

Percy flashed the Violet beast a sheepish grin, scratching his head as he recalled doing something of the sort during his battle with Deimos. Too much had been going on in his mind at the time to worry about that.

'Well, I'm sorry about the hole too. As you can imagine, killing Violets is messy work,' he replied pointedly, his meaning clear. That said, he didn't want to provoke the bug too much, so he rushed to change the topic. 'Anyway, I'm sure you didn't bring us here just to chastise us. I suppose it's safe to assume you want something?'

Percy doubted that wasps could exhale, but he was also rather certain that what he felt surging through the Queen's soul was as close to a sigh as it could get.

'It's not merely a question of what I want. It's just as much about what you want. Or what you should want, at any rate.'

‘I’m not sure I follow,’ Percy replied.

It was admittedly just speculation on his part, but he’d been operating under the assumption that she wanted him to teach her Circulation. Of all the things he’d revealed during his previous visit, he thought that it was the one most likely to have piqued her interest.

That was especially the case, if the Queen had realized that the boosting art could be used in reverse to preserve or even restore a beast’s stamina. Of course, she hadn’t seen Micky use Hibernation or Regulation – since the crow hadn’t even invented those spells yet. On top of that, she would probably find it difficult to replenish her beast mana without a second affinity to draw from. Even so, Percy wouldn’t be surprised if the centuries-old creature had recognized the spell’s potential at a glance, beast or not.

During today’s meeting, Percy’s hope was to exchange Circulation – and maybe even the Moirais’ Decree, if necessary – for an egg to place Nephthys in. Or at least, that had been his goal before listening to the Queen. Suffice to say, her following words shook both his hopes and assumptions to the core.

‘Then I’ll make it clear for you. Unless you find a way to help me, not only is my hive doomed to die out, but with it, so is your entire world…’

Chapter 499: The vilest sin

Percy had no idea what the Queen meant by those words, though he didn’t rush her for an explanation. Luckily, the colossal bug didn’t keep him waiting for too long.

‘One of your people broke the ancient pact between my kind and yours, placing both sides at great risk.’

‘Pact?’

The Queen nodded mentally. ‘Well, it’s more of an unspoken deal than an explicit contract, but your ancestors understood a long time ago that they need our help to produce new gods. Meanwhile, my predecessors also realized that we need your gods to defend our world from outsiders, since producing our own deities ranges from impractical to downright impossible.’

Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the revelation. All of this made sense, of course, but he hadn't known that humans and wasps had been operating under a mutual agreement all this time. Then again, it would have been stranger if the two sides had failed to reach some kind of consensus after coexisting for so long.

'If that's the case, why do my people hunt down your children? Couldn't you just offer us the nectar we need for our advancement, skipping the unnecessary bloodshed entirely?' he asked.

'There are many reasons for this arrangement. Rest assured that I'll explain everything about my hive's inner workings in excruciating detail. There's simply no way around that: not if you are to do what I need you to do. However, you should first understand what the problem is before we discuss anything else.'

Nodding, Percy gestured for her to continue.

'Long story short, we were supposed to limit our expansion to within the Fungal Spire's range. It's not like we ever wanted to move elsewhere anyway, since this is the only place on Remior with enough mana to support our needs. In exchange, your people were supposed to never step foot in our tunnels, and to only collect the nectar they need by hunting the tiny fraction of our kind we send outside. For as long as we can remember, both sides have honoured this arrangement religiously…'

'…until we didn't,' Percy said, completing her sentence for her.

'Indeed. A powerful mage broke into my chambers some time ago, stealing something that we cannot survive without. And I doubt I need to explain the consequences of our impending extinction.'

Percy frowned. He'd come here seeking a body for Nephthys: the last thing he'd expected to hear was that Remior's survival was at stake. Just who would have done something so despicable?

Well, okay… that part wasn't so difficult to guess. There simply weren't that many people capable of doing this in the first place. After all, they'd have to break into a hive teeming with Green and Blue wasps, stealing something of immeasurable importance from their Violet ruler.

Besides, Percy already harboured some guesses as to the culprit's identity, due to the things he'd learned while helping Nesha snoop around Twilight City, trying to figure out the reason for her family's destruction.

'Was it a man with a White core by any chance? When exactly did this happen?'

'He was,' the creature confirmed. 'I'm not familiar with how your kind keeps track of time, but to me it still feels rather recent…' she added. 'Let's see… it happened enough time ago for two Red wasps to have evolved all the way to Green, one after the other.'

Falling silent, Percy took a few seconds to run some calculations in his head. Micky had spent a couple of decades to reach Green, which would translate the wasp's example to roughly forty years.

However, the bugs probably advanced faster than the crow had been able to, considering that they spent most of their lives in such a mana-rich environment, stuffing their faces with nectar every single day. How much faster, Percy didn't know, but if they were about twice as fast as the bird, the timeline would match the reports of Machaon's brief tenure in the Alchemists' Guild.

'I think I may know who it was. But what exactly did he take?' Percy asked again, struggling to imagine what could be so valuable to the Queen.

'An egg,' she replied, causing him to swallow hard. Wasn't that exactly what Percy himself had also come here looking for? Though he doubted that the Violet beast was talking about the egg of a regular wasp: they likely had millions of those, so it wouldn't make sense that losing one would be such a big deal.

Sure enough, the Queen confirmed his assumption. 'This was my heir's egg. Each Starry Queen can only ever lay a single egg that carries the royal lineage. Without my daughter to succeed me, our hive will die out as soon as I do. And I cannot give birth to another princess: only my daughter can.'

Percy frowned, finding this whole thing completely impractical: if not downright ridiculous. How could the wasps' biology have evolved in such an inconvenient way that the future of their entire species would hinge on the survival of a single member?!

Then again, it made sense if he thought about it. Magical beasts didn't have to worry about diseases or miscarriages: or whatever the word was for inert wasp eggs. For creatures like these, every single egg was all but guaranteed to hatch into a healthy specimen.

Since the bugs had no predators or external threats either, the descendants of the Starry Queen were normally as safe as one could be: hidden in the deepest part of the hive and guarded by countless powerful beasts.

Leaving aside the extremely unlikely scenario of a rogue White foolishly ruining everything: which was admittedly a blind-spot in the creatures' evolution: the only thing the hive had to worry about was infighting. Had the Queens been capable of producing multiple successors, the princesses might tear each other: as well as their entire hive: apart. Viewed from that angle, their inability to give birth to a second heir might serve an integral purpose.

'Fine. That answers what the problem is, but it doesn't explain why that bastard would do something so vile,' Percy said.

The Queen shook her head, however. 'Actually, his motive is the one thing we don't have to wonder about. Wasps with the royal lineage produce a denser, purer variant of the nectar that you've no doubt collected from my other descendants. It's called the royal jelly, and it's twice as effective for cleansing one's core.'

Both of Percy's hearts skipped a beat upon hearing that, a trace of greed worming its way to his eyes.

'How can this be?!' he asked, finding the notion difficult to accept.

A resource twice as effective as the nectar would translate to halving the time to each advancement: provided that it could be brewed into an elixir, of course. If that was the case, didn't that mean that Remior had technically possessed a path to godhood for Yellow-borns all along?! Shouldn't their world have already been a greater spring?!

'I know what you're thinking, but it's not as simple as it sounds,' the Queen said, dousing his excitement. 'Royal jelly is twice as effective as regular nectar, but extremely inefficient to produce. Excreting it consumes over a dozen times as much ambient mana as the same amount of nectar. Our hive wouldn't be able to sustain itself if every ordinary member generated the jelly. That's why it's exclusive to the

royal wasps. It's a scarce resource that we strategically invest in our own development, and to accelerate the growth of certain other members of the hive when necessary.'

Okay. That made more sense. So there just wasn't enough royal jelly to go around. If the Divine Order really wanted a Yellow-born to reach the Clear grade, maybe they could forcefully extract enough for a single person, but that would come at the detriment of the hive's development. All things considered, no individual was worth compromising Remior's only source of nectar, no matter how talented they were.

'Somebody should try telling Machaon that,' Percy thought, his frown deepening.

Evidently, the leader of House Asclepius didn't give a shit. He'd abused the power and trust that everyone had given him, selfishly putting the whole world at stake just to reach his own goals. In a disturbing way, Machaon's ambition reminded Percy of his own. Didn't he also dream of attaining divinity? And wasn't he willing to go to great lengths to achieve that?

'No. I'm nothing like him,' Percy reassured himself.

There were certain lines that he simply refused to cross. This was why he hadn't dared to steal his family's tree to awaken his second core all those years ago. Instead, he'd opted to search for an alternative source of life mana to repair the Moirais' Decree.

And, while he'd also been planning to steal an egg from the hive, Percy hadn't even known about the royal lineage or the jelly. It probably wasn't an accident that Remior's upper echelons kept that sensitive information under wraps, but Percy wouldn't have considered pulling the rug from under everyone's feet even if it had been common knowledge. And this was despite him being a Red-born: not a Yellow-born: thus needing every single advantage that he could get to reach the end of the Colour realm.

He'd only ever wanted to grab a regular egg: one out of millions. His goal hadn't been to accelerate his advancement, but merely to establish his personal source of nectar, so that he wouldn't have to constantly search for more.

Clearly, some people didn't have the same moral scruples as him.

‘Now what? Can’t we get your daughter back? Asshole or not, he has to have kept her alive, right? He’ll need her to produce royal jelly for thousands of years before he becomes a demigod,’ Percy reasoned.

‘Honestly, I don’t know,’ the Queen replied. ‘Naturally, it’s in his best interest not to hurt her, but that doesn’t mean he’s been able to keep her healthy. Royal wasps are born at Orange, not Red, and require a lot more mana than regular wasps to survive. And that’s without somebody stealing their jelly. Even if she hasn’t died yet, I wouldn’t be surprised if her growth has been severely stinted. I doubt she’ll be able to survive long enough to reach the higher grades outside the hive’s special environment. Even I struggle to sustain myself at Violet. This is the main reason none of us ever attempts to reach White, despite having a long enough lifespan for it.’

‘There’s still a chance though!’ Percy protested. ‘Raise a fuss! Try to get the gods’ attention! If they realize what he did, they’ll get your daughter back in a day!’

The Queen mentally sighed again. ‘Perhaps. Your gods are notoriously difficult to reach, however, and our kind cannot communicate with your people as easily. Whenever I tried to reach out to the Guild’s elders, your hunters just slaughtered my children as usual. If the situation persists, I am inevitably going to take more drastic measures, but I was hoping to find another solution. Especially since I don’t know if my heir will be healthy enough to lead the hive even if we do retrieve her.’

‘What solution did you have in mind?’

‘Well, my first idea was to forcefully lay more royal eggs and hope that one would be lucky enough to survive. So far, it hasn’t worked. I’ve only managed to drain my strength and cut my lifespan short.’

Percy swallowed hard upon listening to the desperation in the creature’s voice. If the wasp in Machaon’s possession was indeed dead or irreversibly damaged… and if the current Queen also died… humanity would be screwed!

Their existing gods wouldn’t be affected, and a few of the Order’s demigods might attain divinity too, but that would be it. With every god that died, Remior would forever have one less, until they were back in the same primitive state as Sol’s people, struggling to protect themselves from demi-humans and beasts!

And that might actually be the best-case scenario. Percy had no idea how Remior's relationship with other worlds looked, but if they had any enemies that knew of the planet's location, they would surely pounce the moment they sensed weakness, enslaving them like Micky's people!

'Any better ideas?' he asked, his heart now racing with worry.

'I could make a push to White. For a long time, I've been balancing my consumption to sustain my core without cleansing it as much, but I bet I can get there if I really try. No Starry Queen in history has ever dared to evolve into an Empress, yet I think that the promotion might replenish my strength and reset my ability to give birth to a new successor. Of course, I'll definitely starve to death not long after my advancement. It's either that or starving out the rest of the hive, which is unacceptable. But there's no guarantee this will work, so I've been saving it as a last resort.'

That… sounded even scarier than just laying eggs by the dozens and hoping for one to hatch. If the Queen attempted this, there would be no going back. But the Violet beast wasn't done.

'I was torn between launching an all-out attack against your people to catch your gods' attention, or ignoring your kind entirely and gambling with my evolution. And there was also the option of doing both: reaching White would improve my ability to make noise, and eating hordes of humans would buy me some time before I ran out of food.'

Percy's eyes widened with horror as he realized how dangerous an all-out invasion would have been. An endless army of powerful wasps led by a White-cored Starry Empress… no matter the outcome, this would have been catastrophic for Remior.

By the time the gods stepped in to stabilize the situation, the damage might have been irreversible. Even if they managed to restore the hive to a functional state, how many people would have lost their lives in the conflict?

'What stopped you?' he asked.

'You did,' the Queen replied. 'Watching you, I realized that there might be another way out of this mess.'

Chapter 500: Mutual goal

Percy didn't need the Queen to complete her explanation to know what she had in mind: her meaning was already clear. As luck would have it, the two had actually wanted the same thing all along! If only she'd told him the last time he was here: instead of trying to have her children kidnap him: they could have avoided so much trouble!

'You seem to have figured it out already,' she said, before pointing at Micky with her other foreleg. 'Indeed, I want you to do the same thing you did for that creature, to help me produce a new heir.'

Percy didn't bother correcting her. Obviously, the wasp only wanted him to turn one of the inert eggs into a regular familiar: she likely had no idea that Micky had already fused with him and turned into an aspect. Still, there were a couple of things he didn't understand.

'How did you even learn about him? I'm sure you've observed us through your subjects' eyes, but you never witnessed Micky's creation.'

'Correct. In fact, I didn't see you possess the wasps either. There are too many wasps in the hive for me to control at once, and the weaker ones have rather undeveloped minds too, which makes sharing their senses difficult: if not downright unpleasant. Most of the time, I just send them vague commands en masse. Things like "harvest mana outside" or "attack the intruder".'

'Then how?'

The giant bug sent Percy the mental equivalent of a shrug. 'I did notice that something strange had been interfering with my control over the Starry Soldier for months, though I couldn't have imagined that it was somebody deliberately getting in my way. I'd simply assumed that it had been a defective wasp. I only realized that it was you after I took control of that Starry Knight. Sadly, the Soldier had already been destroyed at that point, otherwise I could have taken advantage of our mutual connection to reach out to you.'

'So, you did the next best thing and tried to capture us alive,' Percy replied.

'Yes. Looking back into the signals I'd received from the Soldier, I was able to infer how you'd injured and possessed it. And I could tell how the bird differed from the others at a glance. The wasps had merely been your minions: temporary shells you had to constantly coerce to do your bidding. But not

the bird. It's a permanent creation with its own personality and better growth potential. I admit that I have no idea what happened to it in this most recent battle, but it has confirmed my guess that you can even bring creatures back from the verge of death.'

Okay. The Queen had clearly noticed that a few things had been off with "Micky's" behaviour since she brought them here. Perhaps they should be more cautious while negotiating with the Violet beast. She was far sharper and wiser than they'd given her credit for. Either way, their condition didn't really affect the situation much.

'Whatever the case, I hope you can do something similar, to breathe life into one of the inert eggs. If I'm not mistaken, turning one of my offspring into a permanent subordinate has been your goal too, right? It's why you infiltrated my hive the last time, and also why you returned to this place now.'

'It is,' Percy admitted, still finding the Queen's willingness to cooperate difficult to believe. 'Aren't you worried about placing your hive's future in the hands of a complete stranger though?'

'My hive's future is already bleak. I would be a fool to worry about my unborn daughter's allegiance when I cannot even grant her a life without your help. Besides, I very much hope that our arrangement will be temporary. You'll foster my successor for a single generation, until she can pass the hive to a child of her own. After that, you and your kind will leave us be and never disturb our home again.'

Percy sighed.

Under these circumstances, he had no reason to decline the Queen's generous offer. If anything, this was quite the opportunity for him too, in more ways than one. Not only was the Violet beast willing to give him exactly what he needed, but the princess would make for an even better familiar than he could have hoped for.

With a single move, he'd be helping Nephthys and the Amenthei, saving Remior from certain destruction, as well as gaining leverage to prevent the other Houses and possibly even the gods from bullying his loved ones. Finally, he'd obtain his personal source of not just nectar, but royal jelly: assuming that he could find a way to take advantage of it without compromising the hive's survival.

'I'm more than willing to try, but I can't promise results. I've only ever made a single familiar before, and it was completely by accident. At the very least, your eggs need to have some life in them for this to

work,' he said, before scratching his head. 'Also, I have to fuse a different soul into your daughter's body. I already have someone in mind, but I need you to understand that your hive's future will ultimately belong to her. I've already explained how important the Starry Wasps are to her, but she only ever agreed to be placed in the body of a regular wasp.'

'If she was willing to be reborn as a lowly Drone, finding herself inside the body of a Princess sounds to me like a bargain,' the Queen insisted, some irritation flaring through their connection.

'I can't deny that, and you can rest assured that I'll let her know how much is depending on her. Still, I can't guarantee that she'll be willing to give you a granddaughter, and I'm not going to force her,' Percy replied, standing his ground.

He knew it wasn't ideal, but he couldn't help it. He'd have to hear the goddess's opinion before committing to anything else.

'I understand,' the Queen spat a few seconds later, not sounding very pleased.

Percy continued, however. 'Even if we fail, it doesn't mean that there's nothing we can do. I would ask you to give me a regular egg to put my friend in. In exchange, I swear I'll do everything in my power to reach out to the Divine Order in your stead, to get your other daughter back. I don't know what state she's in, but anything is better than nothing.'

The Queen remained silent, but Percy could tell that she was in agreement. Pulling her leg back, she severed their connection, slowly turning around. Each thunderous stomp of her colossal limbs sent a tremor through the cavern as she entered one of the wider tunnels, motioning for him to follow with her antennae.

As they walked through the long corridor, Percy had Micky examine the pyramid again. Unlike the previous time they'd checked, there was now a giant crack that had nearly split the structure in half, revealing Nephthys's wisp.

The radiant soul that had once struggled to fit within the shrunken pyramid now only occupied a fraction of its volume, several thin tendrils stretching to every corner to keep the object from falling apart, and to shield her subjects from harm. Their own souls were barely perceptible: mere dots glinting

faintly within the goddess's wisp. And if that hadn't been enough, Nephthys's soul appeared to be evaporating even faster without the pyramid's protection.

"Please hang in there just a little longer. We're almost there," Percy whispered, fully aware that the goddess probably couldn't hear him.

The Queen brought them to another chamber, this one even wider than the last. There were fewer exits: though still dozens of them: and fewer wasps too. But there was something else here.

Two colossal pits had been dug into the floor; each filled to the brim with green goo. And Percy noticed piles upon piles of spherical objects faintly visible beneath the surface. Each was about the size of an apple, though their glossy shells were pitch black, with countless colourful dots adorning them: much like the wasps' carapaces.

The eggs in one pit appeared slightly different, however. Golden watermarks rippled around their surfaces, giving them a pattern resembling the one on the Queen's own exoskeleton.

Stopping at the centre of the room, the Violet beast waited for Percy to reestablish their mental link: something that he didn't hesitate to do. Only then did she explain what they were seeing.

'Our kind can be separated into three main types. The first are the royal wasps like me and my kidnapped daughter. Only one can be born per generation, but you can clearly see all my failed attempts at producing a second,' she said, pointing at the piles of eggs with the golden markings. 'Wasps with a royal lineage are only considered mature after reaching the Violet grade, at which point they are known as Starry Queens. Like I mentioned earlier, they are born at Orange instead of Red, and are called Starry Princesses up to and including the Blue grade.'

Percy nodded. 'I guess the second type includes all the other wasps I've seen until now?'

'Indeed. Those make up the overwhelming majority of our ranks. From Red to Blue, they are the Starry Drones, Workers, Soldiers, Knights and Commanders. But what you might not know, is that non-royal wasps are incapable of evolving past Blue.'

Percy frowned upon hearing that. This was something that he hadn't heard before. Until today, he hadn't even known that the Queen came from a different caste of bugs than the rest.

The reason for their inability to grow past a certain point wasn't difficult to guess: it was probably the same one that restricted the Queen from producing multiple Princesses. Less competition for her heir. If every wasp had the potential to reach Violet, some might fall outside her control, challenging her rule.

Whatever the reason, it was his lucky break that the Queen had offered him a superior egg to fashion his familiar out of, otherwise he might have ended up stuffing Nephthys's soul into a defective body stuck at the lower grades.

'I take it the Drones hatch from this other pile of eggs, then?' he asked.

'Not quite,' the Queen said, shaking her head. She remained motionless for a few seconds, probably relaying a command to her subjects.

A few of the smaller wasps in the room crawled into the second pit, placing a few of the eggs without the golden markings onto their backs before carrying them out of the chamber and through some of the other tunnels. Only once they were alone did the Queen resume her explanation.

'There are tens of millions of wasps in the hive, and only a single Queen. Naturally, it would be impossible for me to lay all the eggs by myself. That's where the third type of wasps come in: they act as the intermediary between me and the rest.'

The Violet beast remained perfectly still, clearly waiting for something. The cavern shook again, another massive creature slowly approaching. Percy watched curiously as a second behemoth crawled out of a corridor about a minute later, a Blue star thrumming rhythmically inside its thorax.

At first, he thought this was a Starry Commander: the first of its kind that he'd ever laid eyes upon. But he soon realized that this wasn't quite right. This wasp had a very different body structure from the others he had seen, including the Queen. It clearly wasn't designed for combat or even moving around much.

First, the creature had no wings or eyes! Its frame was far bulkier than the rest, its thorax and abdomen almost fused into a single, bulbous cylinder that its six stubby limbs struggled to support. On closer examination, the wasp appeared too large for a Blue beast: it was still smaller than the Queen, but not by much. At the very least, it was far bigger than the creatures Percy had seen on Thess'kala. Finally, it didn't have a stinger either, but rather countless small holes spiralling all the way from where the stinger should have been, to about two-thirds of the way around its abdomen.

As if to demonstrate their purpose, the creature's body convulsed a coupled of times, squelching sounds emanating from the holes as they vomited countless small eggs. They were coated in a similar type of green goo to the ones in the pits, but these were smaller than the others, barely the width of two fingers. The creature didn't stop until two tall mounds had formed by its sides.

'These will hatch into Drones,' the Queen explained. 'As for the ones in the pit, they will hatch into the Orange versions of the Starry Breeders: much like my wingless daughter there.'

Percy nodded in understanding.

Each Queen could only directly give birth to a single Princess and countless immature Breeders, while the Breeders themselves would be the ones tasked with populating the rest of the hive after reaching Blue. In essence, all the wasps Percy and Micky had seen in the past: as well as all the bugs that the Guild's hunters harvested nectar from on a daily basis: weren't actually the Queen's children, but her grandchildren.

However, the Violet beast hadn't brought them here just to give them a tour of the hive. Turning her head toward the pile with the marked eggs, she spoke again.

'Well? What do you think? Is any of them salvageable?'

Micky walked up to the Queen, placing his hand on one of her legs to establish a new mental link with her, freeing Percy up to examine the eggs. Reaching the edge of the pit, he leaned slightly over the viscous fluid to scan the objects.

He took an awfully long amount of time too, checking the entire pile carefully from tip to base, making full use of his mutated eyes as he searched for any traces of life that he could capitalize upon.

By the time he announced his verdict, his heart had sunk.

‘Every single one of them is dead.’