Wanderer 621

Chapter 621: Justice

In a flash of inspiration, the clone decided to bring a beast that had died of old age to the Vault. That way, the creature was bound to die again not long after he abandoned its body, denying Metatron a two-cored test subject.

No matter how skilled the titan's healers were, there wasn't much that they could do to extent a mortal's lifespan. If such a thing were possible, the top factions in the universe wouldn't have prided themselves in their ability to turn Orange-borns into gods.

At most, Metatron and his people would be able to grant the beast a second core and feed it enough mana to get its original core to the next grade, but that wouldn't buy the creature more than a few weeks.

Percy generally avoided pulling pranks like that on the titan, not wanting to get on his wrong side. While bringing him a host near the end of its natural life wasn't against the terms of their deal, Percy didn't know whether the god would care for the technicality.

This was arguably the worst possible time to play games with Metatron, as falling out might cost Percy the chance to enter the void tournament. Then again, didn't that apply both ways? Would the titan be willing to call everything off at such a critical moment over something this dumb?

Percy briefly considered stopping by Ruby Heart to grab some of the red material as well, but ultimately decided against it.

'Let's not take this too far…'

Sure, he wouldn't be responsible for all the injuries the creature would suffer from the violent currents near the base of the whirlpool either, but handing Metatron a mangled mess of a host would skirt the line more than necessary.

Besides, it was best not to open portals to the Vault from his resource farm: for the same reason he avoided doing so from Remior. Percy still didn't fully understand how much awareness Metatron had

over each activation of his Decree, so he'd rather not give him extra opportunities to learn the coordinates of important locations.

After travelling through the cosmos for a couple of days longer than he would have liked, Percy found a decent body to ride to the artificial world. Entering the circular rift, he soon found himself standing on the familiar metallic floor of the Vault, gazing at giant runes that pulsed rhythmically in the distance.

As was often the case, he was immediately surrounded by a crowd of curious sapients, prompting him to click his: whatever his host had in place of a tongue: in annoyance. Then again, he couldn't help but appreciate how much information his newly evolved mutation granted him as his secondary domain enveloped everything within hundreds of metres.

'Yeah… this will definitely be a huge help in the tournament,' he confirmed as he realized how easily he could count even the beads of sweat present on these people's bodies.

Much to Percy's dismay, it didn't take long for his three-dimensional vision to lock onto a certain approaching figure that he hadn't been in a rush to meet. The crowd parted to make way for the Blue, allowing him to slither through their ranks.

The Thess'kalan looked just like Percy remembered him. He appeared slightly taller than the average sapient, yet that was just a trait of his species. It had to do with the way their long tails supported their upper bodies, though their torsos weren't necessarily larger than those of humans.

Kassorith was covered from head to tail in pale scales. His crimson eyes were looking at Percy curiously, the Blue having clearly recognized the exotic animal as one of his hosts. His lips curled up in the shape of a smug, punchable smirk.

Finally, a set of blue robes adorned with a distinctive violet trim were draped over the scaled man's shoulders, hanging loosely in front of his chest. The clothes looked almost identical to those that Kassorith had worn on Thess'kala, though Percy didn't miss the hints of synthetic fabric that one could purchase from the Vault's system.

Clearly, the robes were newly sewn, yet Metatron had tried to make them resemble the originals as much as possible, so that his prized test subject wouldn't look out of place in the upcoming competition.

‘He must have sent him to greet me,’ Percy guessed with a sigh, seriously doubting that Kassorith had just happened to stumble upon him by accident as soon as he got here. Percy had obviously known that he’d be working with the Thess’kalan again, but he’d be lying if he said that he was happy to see him. ‘Whatever… it’s too late for regrets anyway…’

At the end of the day, Kassorith wasn’t that important. He was just a tool for Percy to use and get rid of when convenient.

With a resigned eyeroll, he gestured at the scaled person to follow him to a more isolated location. People were unlikely to bother Percy if he tried to possess the Thess’kalan in plain sight, but he preferred working without an audience.

The two travelled silently for a few minutes, circling a cube-shaped structure that Percy didn’t know the purpose of: though he was pretty sure that it wasn’t a training cube, nor a residential one.

As soon as they were alone, Percy halted, briefly examining his host’s body for the first time since possessing the creature. He had almost forgotten to do so earlier, since it didn’t really matter how it looked. The poor beast would die not long after they parted ways. That said, Percy did need to know what he was working with.

His three-dimensional vision promptly informed him that the beast resembled some kind of jackal, though it did have a couple of questionable features here and there. Percy didn’t attempt to speak, seriously doubting that the creature would even be capable of it.

Instead, he raised his right forelimb, motioning for Kassorith to lie down. The Thess’kalan calmly followed his instructions, seemingly without a care in the world, clearly aware that Percy wasn’t going to harm him. His smirk only widened as he did so.

‘The bastard is enjoying this…!’

Grinding his fangs, Percy gathered some phantom mana to his claws, inflicting a few precise incisions on his patient’s soul. At the same time, he asked his main body to send another clone his way.

After that, there wasn't much to do, besides keeping the Thess'kalan stable until he got possessed: oh… and holding himself back from "accidentally" carving too many unnecessary wounds into the guy's soul.

Only after his fellow Percy reassured him that Kassorith would be okay: much to both of their chagrin: did he finally leave.

***

'Well, well… if it isn't my ticket to glory and riches!' the Thess'kalan drawled, every word lacquered in syrupy mockery. 'I have to admit, I didn't expect us to work together again this soon. Not after the way you left me here to die. Hmmm? What's up with this fancy new vision? You must've kept yourself busy over the past decade.'

Percy ignored him entirely, more interested in studying his host's second core. He knew that they wouldn't be able to use it in the tournament, but he couldn't help his curiosity.

'Lava affinity. And it's Green already, with all the channels for Circulation cleared and tempered,' he concluded after a cursory examination.

None of this was particularly surprising. It was highly unlikely that Kassorith had awakened a composite affinity, and Metatron wouldn't have given him an element that he'd already possessed, so the Thess'kalan had probably awakened earth and been given fire.

He was pretty much in the same situation as Elaine: with two composite affinities that shared a single common element: though he had ended up like this in a slightly different way. The only thing worse would have been to awaken a second metal affinity, though the odds of that happening had been extremely low.

Neither Percy nor Kassorith said anything for a few minutes, so it was actually Micky who eventually broke the tense silence.

'I guess I can finally introduce myself to you, asshole,' the Huehuan said.

Percy wasn't a huge fan of his friend revealing his existence to a potential enemy, but they'd already discussed this on the way here. Metatron knew that Percy had fused with somebody, so it didn't really matter.

They just had to stick with Percy's lie that he had acquired his blessing of permanence from Micky: and not a Ring of Sacrilege. Since Percy had supposedly only been able to absorb so many spectral traits thanks to his friend, they would also have to pretend that Micky had been present during Percy's entire trip to Thess'kala, having lurked quietly inside Kassorith's soul without ever revealing himself.

The good news was that Micky did have access to all the associated memories, so it wouldn't be difficult to keep the façade up. If Kassorith or Metatron pressed them on that, they would just have to mention a version of the truth: that Percy and Micky's minds had been fused for a while, thus having operated as a single person until recently.

Perhaps it would have been simpler for Micky to just shut up for the next few weeks: or however long the tournament lasted: but Percy didn't want to do that to his friend for no good reason.

'Oh? And who might you be? Percy's mysterious companion?' Kassorith asked, sounding more curious than alarmed. The titan must have filled him in at some point.

'Name's Micky. I'm the one who wasn't dumb enough to betray the person keeping my soul from falling apart back when I was the one possessed.'

Percy was tempted to point out that Micky had also tried to kick him out of his body at first, but ultimately decided to let the comment slide.

Kassorith chuckled. 'It's not like I had a choice. Syrreneth would have skinned me alive if I hadn't helped him, and it's not like your buddy would have jumped to my rescue. Besides… do you honestly expect me to regret my actions? I'll have you know that things have turned out for the better since I stabbed Percy in the back.'

Percy frowned, though he couldn't exactly refute the Blue's words.

Sure, had Kassorith never betrayed him, he would have still had a good life on Thess'kala. Percy had earned him a new mutation, several additional prizes that he could have traded for even better stuff, and the reputation of an elite disciple who had won a regional tournament.

However, Kassorith's life in the Vault was clearly even better.

He was free to use his second core: which he hadn't even known about before getting here: to his heart's content. He'd even traded his spare resources for an affinity-changing treasure and Circulation. Finally, due to the titan's deal with Percy, Kassorith was about to obtain yet another new mutation. The Sage's Eye was temporary, but the Thess'kalan would unfortunately keep his Ruby Bones, in addition to competing in the void tournament for even more rewards.

'There's really no justice in the world,' Percy grunted, though he didn't linger on that. Instead of bickering with his smarmy host, he would rather use his time productively. 'Do me a favour and activate all forms of your boosting art. I hope you know how to do that.'

'What for? You know that we won't be able to use any of it in the tournament, right?' the Thess'kalan asked.

'I'm aware. Just do it: there's still a way to benefit from it indirectly,' Percy insisted.

With a shrug, the scaled Blue followed his instructions, taking several deep breaths and flooding his cores and channels with mana. Soon, five instances of the Refined spell activated, sending waves of strength rippling through his muscles.

Kassorith had used the metal, lava, fire, lightning, and earth versions of Circulation. It appeared that plasma was still beyond him. Percy didn't know whether his host had yet to master that particular form of affinity fusion or if it was just too difficult to circulate a composite affinity that he didn't have a core for, but it didn't matter much. This was already plenty.

Not interested in Kassorith's physical enhancements, Percy drew out his willpower and shaped it into the most powerful domain he could muster, allowing Obatala's Approval to lock it in place. Kassorith wouldn't have access to this later, but Percy and Micky would, giving them another small edge in the competition.

Once that was done, he tilted his borrowed head up and spoke loudly, his words seemingly aimed at nobody in particular. “If you’re done watching us, I’d like to get this over with.”

Barely a second later, their surroundings shifted as they found themselves inside one of the smaller training cubes, standing before a certain pentapus.

Chapter 622: Escort

Metatron didn’t even bother to greet Percy, being too busy summoning a strange vial from seemingly nowhere and throwing it to Kassorith. “Drink. Use your mana to carry the liquid to your second core as if it were a cleansing resource and circulate it through your lava and fire channels.”

Percy barely got a chance to examine the substance as his host caught the vial and obediently guzzled its contents down in a single motion. As much as he despised the guy, Percy had to commend the Blue’s decisiveness. The Thess’kalan hadn’t even flinched upon tasting the vile concoction. Then again, it wasn’t like defying Metatron had ever been an option.

From what little Percy had seen, the vial had contained the foulest liquid that he’d ever had the misfortune of laying eyes upon: and that was saying something, coming from him.

It was thick, viscous and sticky, sporting a questionable brown colour that reminded him of sewage more than any potion or elixir. There were traces of mana scattered inside the substance, but they were merely of the Red grade. Worse still, it stank of rot and didn’t taste much better, with an added hint of bitterness and spiciness that stung the Thess’kalan’s throat.

Despite the discomfort, Kassorith allowed lava mana to mix with the substance inside his stomach, pushing it to his abdomen with practiced ease. At first, the sludge behaved no differently from an elixir: at least until it entered the snake-person’s core. The moment it got dumped into the organ, it clung to its crystalline walls and started displacing the composite mana.

There was more than enough liquid to fill the spherical container up, so it didn’t take long for it to spill into Kassorith’s channels, spreading through half of his mana networks within seconds and forcefully expunging their contents from his pores.

The substance nearly seeped into the Thess’kalan’s earth channels too, though he was careful not to let it, since those were shared between both cores and had to remain usable for the tournament.

‘Not the most pleasant feeling,’ Micky complained with a mental groan.

Percy agreed with his friend, though he didn’t care. The purpose of the liquid was obvious by now, and it wasn’t like Metatron was trying to hurt them. Besides, this wasn’t his body anyway, so he just observed the process with interest.

A few minutes later, the substance slowed down and started coalescing. It had already expunged every mote of lava or fire mana from the Blue’s body, causing a wave of weakness to permeate his muscles.

Percy’s thoughts grew sluggish, his senses dulling. Kassorith’s connection to his second core had been severed so thoroughly that Percy was willing to bet that even his lifespan was now being consumed a little faster than before, though he didn’t have any way to confirm that.

Either way, Metatron’s concoction was quite potent. Focusing his Sage’s Pond inwards, Percy struggled to locate the Thess’kalan’s second core, despite knowing that it was still in there. Pulling the scaled man’s Status up, he focused on the first section.

___

Kassorith (The Lone Wanderer's clone)

Mana cores:

[Mana core 1 – Blue – Metal][Mana core 2 – Green – Lava]___

Evidently, Phoebe’s Decree hadn’t been tricked by the sludge, but that might just be due to Percy knowing the truth about the dormant organ. Regardless, Kassorith would probably have to spend weeks removing the filth and clearing his channels before he could use it again.

Perhaps this was a little overkill. They could have hidden the Blue’s second core with concealment runes or simply by emptying it and making sure it stayed that way, yet Percy understood why the titan had chosen to do things like this.

‘I suppose that even Metatron isn’t confident in tricking the Void Hand’s detection systems with a bunch of half measures. After all, this isn’t a typical greater spring, but one of the top factions in the universe…’

Glancing at the god, Percy couldn’t help but ask, “what’s the sludge called?”

The purple pentapus regarded him for a second before replying. “We haven’t bothered to name it. I’ve had my subordinates try countless combinations of herbs from dozens of planets until we stumbled upon something with the right effect.”

Percy nodded, not very surprised by that. “How much for the recipe, a seed of every ingredient, and detailed instructions for cultivating them?”

Metatron chuckled, summoning yet another object from seemingly nowhere and tossing it over. This time, it was a black cube no larger than Kassorith’s fist. The moment Percy tried to pull it into his spatial seal, the container dissolved into dark motes of space mana, though its contents still appeared inside his storage as intended. There was a small pouch filled with what he assumed to be a bunch of seeds, as well as a few pieces of paper.

“I had a hunch that you’d want it,” the titan explained. “It’ll be fifty thousand credits for the whole bundle.”

Percy frowned. It wasn’t like he couldn’t afford it: since he still had nearly three times the required credits left over from his previous trip: but it was a lot to spend on something like this.

“Seriously? Fifty thousand for just the seeds of a few Red and Brown plants? How about twenty?” he asked back in protest, though he seriously doubted that the god would reconsider.

Sure enough, the pentapus shook his head. “I can’t be bothered to haggle with you today. If you don’t want it, give it back,” he said, extending a tentacle towards the Thess’kalan.

Percy obviously wasn’t happy, but ultimately decided to pay the titan’s extortionate price. The strange potion wouldn’t make him stronger directly, yet he felt that it would be nice for his clones to have a few doses at hand.

The Moirais' Decree was undoubtedly one of Percy's luckiest finds, but it could still get quite inconvenient from time to time. There had been many situations where Percy had been forced to avoid healing potions like the plague, and others when he'd worried about keeping his second core hidden after repairing it.

Having a reliable way of sealing the organ would grow more important as he visited greater springs, and that would be doubly true if he managed to acquire the Void Decree as well.

Besides, Percy was planning to stay away from the Vault for several centuries after the tournament, buying time until he could explain at least one of his upcoming promotions. Consequently, it was wiser to spend some of his credits now, instead of letting them collect proverbial dust in his account for half a millennium.

"Alright, so what am I working with here?" he asked both his host and Metatron, eager to change the subject. "We're clearly not going to have access to Kassorith's second core, nor its passive benefits. Am I right to assume that blessings and Circulation are also off the table?"

The titan nodded. "We don't have a choice. I could have lent him a ring or two, but you can't explain him suddenly acquiring a blessing. Circulation is a bit different. I don't care if you want to use it and claim that it's Kassorith's invention, but I don't think that you're willing to deal with the consequences."

Percy grimaced, knowing that the god was right. Should he use his boosting art even once, he would be handing it away for free to the Void Hand. He wouldn't delude himself into thinking that none of the spectators at such a high-level event would be smart enough to figure out how the Refined spell worked.

Strengthening one of the top factions would make it even harder for Percy and Remior to catch up in the future, and that was without even considering the repercussions of giving the alliance an edge over Sixiang and the Moirai. The last thing Percy wanted was to be personally responsible for upsetting the cosmic order and maybe even directly causing a devastating war.

"That doesn't leave us with many options, does it?" Percy asked again.

Metatron performed a gesture akin to a shrug. “After pondering over the issue, I decided that there is no need to expose too many new skills. The things that you and Kassorith have revealed in the previous tournament are already an excellent starting point. We just have to capitalize and come up with believable explanations for them.”

“I’m listening.”

“The good thing about spectral traits is that their effects aren’t very obvious to an outsider. On top of that, similar things can often be achieved through mindsets or bloodlines,” the titan said. “Am I right to assume that Insomnia and Scribing are among the biggest problems here?”

Percy nodded. He’d used Weaving to stitch up Kassorith’s injuries, but he didn’t think that anyone had noticed that. However, his host’s people would have definitely questioned how he had kept fighting for so many days without sleeping or drawn such powerful enchantments at impossible speeds.

“Good. We’ll blame everything on Kassorith’s bloodline,” Metatron replied, a conspiratorial grin flashing in his eyes.

“His bloodline?” Percy asked, instinctively pulling up the corresponding section of his host’s Status to refresh his memory.

___

Bloodline:

[Moult]: Rebuild your body by shedding your skin and any damaged organs. The amount of discarded flesh and thus the size of the new body are determined by the extent of your injuries.___

Percy creased his brow as he tried to understand the titan’s plan.

He and the Thess’kalan had long established that his bloodline wasn’t usable in combat. Discarding and rebuilding his body took time and left him vulnerable, so it was better used to recover rapidly after a battle.

However, it didn't take Percy long to figure out what the god had in mind. "Are we going to claim that he has a mutated strain?"

"Exactly! It's a bit of a stretch, but it's more believable than admitting that he's been possessed by an alien with all of your abilities. I've even thought of the perfect 'variant'. If anybody asks, you'll say that activating his version of Moult leaves behind a copy of his personality: like an echo of his soul that continues to cohabit his new body."

Percy would have raised an eyebrow if his host had any. This was ingenious. It was simple, and it sounded like something a slight offshoot of the Blue's ability could potentially accomplish, and yet it neatly explained most of their peculiarities.

If anyone spotted Percy's wisp lodged inside Kassorith's body, they could just say that it was the side-effect of the bloodline. It would also explain how they could freely use a second domain, stay awake for longer, and rapidly draw complex enchantments.

"I've had Kassorith study magiscript and hone both his ranged and close combat skills extensively over the past decade," Metatron continued. "I don't think he's quite at your level yet, but he has progressed enough to not be a burden. This is doubly true now that he has access to your Scribing trait. That said, it would be best if you've also prepared a couple of things for the tournament."

Percy gave the titan a brief overview of his Sage's Eye, carefully avoiding any mention of Atlantis: though he understood that Metatron might draw the connections regardless. He also told him about the red powder. He hadn't offered any to his host just yet, since he wanted to receive the okay from Metatron first.

"Very good. It might just be enough. Remember that your goal isn't to win this time. You just need to get through the first few rounds to qualify for the Decree."

Percy exhaled in relief, happy with how things were going. Last time, he and Kassorith had barely been strong enough to fight a grade above their own, but their greatly improved magiscript skills, sharper senses, and tougher body would hopefully make enough of a difference.

That said, there was one final issue that they had yet to address. It was arguably the most serious problem by far, which they had been ignoring since the start of the conversation.

While Kassorith's "mutated bloodline" would explain most of his strange abilities, it wouldn't explain how the Thess'kalan had come to know the Vault's magiscript, nor the circumstances under which he had defected from his home world.

Percy was about to voice his concerns when Metatron beat him to it, having clearly seen the question coming from a kilometre away. "With the small details taken care of, let me explain how we are going to get around the holes in your background."

The titan pointed a tentacle at one of the cube's walls, causing the metal to part into a square opening that was several metres across. The movement was accompanied by a thick burst of hissing steam, a tall and burly silhouette standing on the other side, a pair of horns jutting out of the person's temples.

"This is Lanthaniel," Metatron said. "He's going to be your escort during this trip and the god who has secretly sponsored you your whole life. He's also the one who snatched you from your sect shortly after your victory in the regional tournament, as well as the mentor who has taught you the potent runecrafting language that he has stolen from the Vault of Magic."

Chapter 623: Lanthaniel

"I think I'm going to need more information than that," Percy muttered as he watched the god approach.

Lanthaniel was a hulking humanoid twice as tall as most sapients, perhaps standing a few centimetres taller than even his own people. His dark brown skin was smooth and flawless: universal evidence of eternal youth that every deity shared: yet his muscles bulged with barely concealed strength.

Unlike his lesser tribesmen, Lanthaniel was dressed elegantly. A silken toga was draped over his left shoulder, covering only a single breast while stretching diagonally over his broad chest. A strange piece of jewellery adorned his right horn. It looked like it was made of pure gold, sporting a unique maze-like pattern that spiralled around the bony protrusion, covering it from base to tip.

Every thundering step the god took sent a tremor through the training room. Unlike the likes of Metatron and Phoebe, Lanthaniel either didn't know how or didn't care to conceal his power, an aura of unmistakeable authority constantly oozing out of his massive frame.

"Well, there isn't much to say," the pentapus replied. "Lanthaniel's situation gives us the perfect excuse for your magiscript. Back when he first pledged loyalty to me, he was only a newly promoted god, so he didn't have access to the kind of sensitive information I needed. That wasn't ideal for me, so…"

"You gave him a little 'offering' to bring to his superiors and rapidly climb the ranks?" Percy guessed.

"Precisely. There was this other subordinate of mine who had been foolishly plotting to betray me at the time, so I figured that it was an excellent opportunity to get rid of him and improve Lanthaniel's status in the process. After capturing and executing one of Metatron's evil henchmen, Lanthaniel looted a lot of magiscript knowledge from the corpse, spreading it across Tauros. Since then, the greater spring has developed rapidly, the other members of the Void Hand have been begging them to share their fancy new runes, and Lanthaniel has been hailed as a hero among his people."

Percy listened carefully to the titan's explanation, feeling a lot better about the mission by the time Metatron was done. Still, there were certain details in the plan that had yet to click for him.

"This sort of explains where magiscript and Lanthaniel came from, but not why a god from Tauros decided to sponsor Kassorith."

Metatron did the shrugging thing again. "That's another benefit of blaming all your strange abilities on your bloodline. We're going to make it sound so powerful that any smart god would be drooling at the thought of taking Kassorith in. If anybody asks, you'll claim that Lanthaniel learned about you from an acquaintance on Thess'kala and decided to sponsor you. He asked you to keep the details of your bloodline hidden and try to earn a ticket to the void tournament by yourself, since he didn't want to expose your talents and turn you into a target too early…"

Percy nodded, finally understanding the rest. "And as soon as we won the competition, Lanthaniel decided that it was finally time to swoop in and extract us from the sect, killing poor Syrreneth who tried to get in the way. Does Lanthaniel possess a space affinity?"

Metatron shook his head. “Gods don’t need a space affinity to create small, short-range portals. Anyone can punch a hole through space with enough power. Usually it isn’t worth the effort, since it’s easier to just fly through such a short distance. However, it’s convenient if you’re trying to grab somebody from an alien planet without daring to get too close. Unfortunately, such lousy portals can easily be distinguished from my own masterpieces, but I bet that enough time passed from Syrreneth’s death to when his corpse was discovered that any evidence was lost.”

“Does the Void Hand allow such overt acts of aggression between member-factions?” Percy asked.

This time, it was Lanthaniel who snorted, doing so with enough force to flick a golden ring hooked through his muzzle by a full ninety degrees before speaking in a deep voice. “Aggression? For snatching a mortal and killing another? If Thess’kala didn’t want that to happen to their prized disciple, they should have just given Kassorith more reasons to stay.”

Percy smiled wryly, mentally debating whether to remind the god that this was just their cover story. Kassorith wasn’t really all that talented: or at least he hadn’t been: nor was his bloodline truly that special.

“If that’s everything, I’ll be eagerly waiting for your results,” Metatron said, practically shooing them away.

“Wait!” Percy yelled, trying to stop the titan before he teleported them outside the cube. Sadly, he was too slow, though that didn’t stop him from trying. “We’ve only gone over Kassorith’s backstory and abilities! What about the rest?! When’s the tournament? How are we getting there?”

“Come,” Lanthaniel: who had also been transported outside: said, gesturing at the Thess’kalan to approach. “I’ll answer your questions on the way.”

At the same time, a colourful dot lit up in the god’s sternum, right where his mana core had once been, before expanding rapidly into a swirling vortex twice as tall as the deity himself.

Percy was taken aback by the strange display of power, only to eventually realize that Lanthaniel was inviting him into his internal world. The thought of placing himself at the god’s mercy made him uncomfortable, but he understood that he was just being silly.

Lanthaniel could easily hurt Percy even without him entering, and so could Metatron. If the titan was planning to betray him, there were less contrived ways to do it than inventing this whole void tournament story.

Either way, Kassorith didn't seem to share Percy's concerns. Without even asking for his guest's opinion, he slithered into the wobbly portal, soon landing atop a mound of sand. The Thess'kalan promptly tried to push himself up, though Percy didn't need to wait for his host to examine their surroundings, his omnidirectional senses quickly expanding to the edges of the relatively small space.

He and Kassorith were standing in some sort of miniature desert: just a patch of land barely a couple of kilometres across. The place was mostly dark, though there was a pile of objects tightly packed a few hundred metres away, a few items glowing just brightly enough to barely illuminate the internal world.

'It looks a bit like the inside of our storage seal,' Micky pointed out. 'Just… several times larger and filled with mana.'

Percy nodded mentally. It only made sense that a god would keep their stuff in their internal world.

Overall, this place wasn't much larger than Nephthys's pyramid, the biggest difference being that it unfolded into a single, flat plain rather than being rolled up into a tall, three-dimensional structure. Percy guessed that Lanthaniel was also a relatively young god still in the Self-Discovery stage.

'There are two types of mana here though…' he noted. 'Earth and air. He must have ascended with a dust affinity.'

All things considered, Percy was a little disappointed by the deity's internal world. It was honestly quite pathetic. Leaving aside how much smaller it was from a real world, it felt broken in too many ways to count.

Sure, there was land for them to step on, oxygen for them to breathe, and some mana for them to absorb, but that was it.

For the most part, it wouldn't be unfair to call this an inhospitable wasteland. There were dust particles in the air, forcing Kassorith and Percy to filter them out with their willpower as they breathed. The place was also frigid and claustrophobic.

There was no ceiling above the sand, yet Percy's senses cut off abruptly past a certain point, almost as if space itself stopped existing beyond some invisible boundary.

"If you look around carefully, you'll find formations that generate heat and water, as well as enough packed food to last for several months. Feel free to adjust the enchantments to your liking," Lanthaniel said, his booming voice sounding even louder than before, his every word causing the whole plane to shake.

Percy nodded for him to continue.

"We'll be travelling for around three Thess'kalan months. I could probably fly you there in half the time if I rushed, or Metatron could have just teleported us closer, but there's no point. The next tournament won't start until then. I suggest that you make use of this time to train: or do whatever you want without bothering me."

Percy sighed. He would have honestly loved to chat with the god for a bit longer, wishing to ask him how mages in the Concept realm traversed the cosmos, yet it didn't sound like Lanthaniel was interested in giving him a lesson.

With nothing else to do, Percy pulled enough red powder out of his seal to form a person-sized pile by his host's tail, prompting Kassorith to start consuming it. Percy hadn't bothered to grind the particles this time, guessing that a Blue with an enhanced physique wouldn't have any issues processing them like this.

While the Thess'kalan was busy munching on the substance, Percy took some time to study the mana in this space.

He couldn't easily perceive Clear mana, so it had felt almost like regular ambient mana at first, though it didn't take him long to realize that it was several times denser. Trying to absorb it made him feel like he was submerged inside an ocean, pulling a slab of steel through his channels.

More importantly, the substance seemed to pop into existence out of nowhere. While mortals had to absorb and convert mana from their surroundings, it looked like gods could generate their own mana internally.

'No wonder that even newly promoted deities are considered dozens of times stronger than demigods…'

While those at the peak of the Colour realm and those at the bottom of the Concept realm wielded the same grade of mana on paper, gods seemed to have access to a practically endless supply of it.

That made Percy question why the natives of Huehue had valued the Dance so highly. If deities couldn't raise their grade any higher, and didn't have any need for ambient mana, what was the point of the Masterful spell?

'There must be some important detail that we're missing,' Micky pointed out, careful not to let Kassorith overhear the conversation.

Percy nodded.

Either way, absorbing the thick mana was a strange experience. At first, Percy found himself struggling to convert even a single mote, but that turned out to be caused by Lanthaniel's willpower permeating the substance. After Percy wasted several minutes trying and failing to seize some, the god seemed to realize his blunder, loosening his hold over the mana just enough to let Kassorith absorb it.

Suffice to say, the mana was impossibly potent, with a single droplet being more than enough to refill Kassorith's core in an instant. However, it seemed to lack certain qualities of ambient mana from the outside world.

The Thess'kalan's primary core shared the earth affinity with Lanthaniel, so replenishing half of his reserves incurred almost no losses. That said, turning air mana into lightning was terribly inefficient, and the internal world lacked pure mana or any other components of ambient mana that Percy was used to.

Fortunately, the sheer density of the god's mana still made this a non-issue.

“Interesting. With so much mana and no need for sleep, we can probably get a lot of extra training done in three months. Are you sure that you don’t mind us going all out in here?”

A boisterous laughter filled the air, causing the drifting particles of dust to vibrate. “I doubt that you can cause any serious damage to my internal world itself. I would just caution you to avoid breaking my stuff. There’s nothing too valuable, but you won’t survive if the formations stop working or you destroy all the food.”

Chapter 624: Rules

Percy and his spectral companions had taken the god up on his offer, using the past few weeks productively. Sadly, Lanthaniel’s internal world was too cramped for a Violet-level mage to fight freely, and they didn’t even have a sparring partner, so there was a limit to what they had been able to do.

Even so, they had seized the opportunity to familiarize themselves with each other’s abilities. None of them was new to fighting, and they had even cooperated in the past, so they only needed to get used to each other’s recent progress and work their new tricks into a coherent, joint arsenal.

Booming shockwaves had continuously shaken the desert as red-hot streams of scorching air had kept digging into the sand and melting it into rough patches of glass.

This had naturally been caused by a version of the formation that Percy and Kassorith had used in the final round of the regional tournament. It was arguably the most powerful attack that had been unleashed in that entire competition, though they could now use it a lot more liberally.

Micky’s presence didn’t add a third domain to their teamwork, yet it did allow Percy to split his willpower into a pair of weaker domains that could be used for different tasks. This meant that each of them could take charge of a different layer of the formation, piecing the complex enchantments together in practically no time.

The last time Percy had used the spell, he had been forced to do everything by himself. Preparing the runes had taken way too long, and he had only succeeded because his opponent had been rendered immobile by his own bloodline.

Things were different now.

With three people working together and each being more skilled than Percy had been in the past, they could create many copies of the formation in mere seconds, treating them more like casual attacks than a finisher.

The addition of amplification and lightning resonance runes had allowed them to empower the spell further, without having to invest as much mana. Percy had even come up with the brilliant idea of incorporating flow runes into the enchantments to direct the attacks into concentrated beams rather than letting them explode indiscriminately.

Of course, the superheated mana didn't dig very deep into the dense sand. The solidified patches were barely a few centimetres thick, so Lanthaniel could easily shatter them back into dust with a single thought.

Clearly, the god hadn't lied when he said that they wouldn't be able to damage his internal world. Still, Percy was confident that their opponents in the void tournament wouldn't be able to shrug off the potent blasts nearly this casually.

Other than getting used to their heightened offensive power, Percy and his companions had practiced with their improved senses. He guessed that they would be able to use Greater Foresight anywhere inside their range, though they didn't have a live opponent to test that on.

Even without using their domains, the Sage's Pond covered a lot of space, yet it was obviously stronger when they used their willpower to expand it. Percy, Micky and Kassorith had spent a lot of time shifting their domains between reinforcing their defences, empowering their attacks, or sharpening their senses: getting as used to the process as they could.

On a different topic, Percy was certain that they could now survive multiple Violet-level spells head on. As expected, the red powder had enhanced both Kassorith's scales and bones, granting him the most potent version of the mutation that Percy had seen to date: Ruby Panoply.

He was more than a little envious of the treacherous Thess'kalan for getting more out of the substance than him or his familiar, though he wasn't sure that he would have wanted his own skin painted crimson from head to toe.

Percy had asked Lanthaniel whether he should use his Mimicry trait to suppress the visual aspect of the mutation. The god had insisted that making others curious about the material wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Everyone would be less likely to bother them during the tournament, though a lot of gods would probably swarm Lanthaniel after the competition, looking to purchase some powder for themselves and their disciples or descendants.

'We'll all have to escape to the Vault as soon as we're done with the competition,' Percy reminded himself.

During a break from training, Percy summoned another pile of red dust inside the god's internal world, offering some to their escort. "This is for you. Tell Metatron that it's going to cost him a hundred thousand credits though."

While he generally preferred not to strengthen the Vault more than necessary, Percy felt a little bad about the god who had spent the past three months ferrying them to the void tournament. Even though Lanthaniel was merely acting on the titan's orders, he was risking his life: or at least his cover: to give them this precious opportunity.

Besides, it would look strange if the person who had supposedly discovered Ruby Heart hadn't personally consumed any of the miraculous resource.

"Don't mind if I do," Lanthaniel replied, causing a portal to open beneath the pile of powder and pulling it out of his internal world. "But we don't have to bother the boss with this. I'll pay you myself, and if it works on me, I'll double the payment."

Percy couldn't help but frown. "You can do that? I thought that the Vault's system didn't allow residents to trade or share resources."

Lanthaniel chuckled. "Perks of being a god. The boss isn't as strict with us. Well… in this case, he wouldn't be too happy with me giving you so much money since he's trying to get you to join, but strengthening one of our deities is more than worth the cost."

Hearing that, Percy started to regret his offer, thinking that he may have made a terrible mistake. Alas, it was too late to take the powder back.

'Lanthaniel doesn't seem like a very talented god anyway. Giving him slightly stronger bones won't change much,' Percy consoled himself. 'Besides, I'm dying to know if the powder actually works on gods.'

Lanthaniel didn't inform him of the result, though Percy supposed that he would receive his answer as soon as they reached their destination. The next time the god spoke, he switched to a different topic.

"We'll be arriving in a few days, so I suppose it's time to give you more information about the competition."

Percy perked up, as did Micky and their host, prompting Lanthaniel to continue.

"Despite it being called the void tournament, its format is different from the one on Thess'kala. You won't have to worry about knockout battles until you reach the top sixteen, and you'll qualify for the Decree if you get to the top eight, so there's only a single fight that you can't afford to lose."

This… was great news, though Percy could see a 'but' coming from a kilometre away. "What about before then?"

"There are two other rounds before the elimination phase, and they can be considered both easier and harder to get through: depending on how you look at it," Lanthaniel said, before elaborating. "One can always get lucky if a superior opponent is having a bad day or if it's a good matchup, but you won't be able to rely on such luck during the first round. It involves a comprehensive test of your abilities in several different categories such as raw power or defence. You won't be competing directly against the other contestants, but you do have to surpass some minimal thresholds to qualify for the second round. You are allowed to fail a couple of tests, yet you'll have to pass at least three out of five."

"How difficult are they?" Percy asked.

“Very. They are designed for mages a full grade higher than you, which is Violet in your case. As I’m sure that Kassorith has told you, most participants from the lesser members of the alliance don’t make it past the first round.”

Percy nodded, understanding what Lanthaniel meant by saying that it was both easier and harder than an unpredictable battle. If a participant met the requirements, they were basically guaranteed to pass, otherwise they would certainly fail.

“Why are they doing things this way?”

“They want to ensure that everyone who progresses through the competition is genuinely qualified to be there. They don’t want to waste valuable rewards on a bunch of weaklings just because they happened to join the event during a less competitive year.”

“Makes sense I suppose. Why don’t they apply the same rules to the regional tournaments though?”

“The way our leaders see it, if you can’t even win a regional tournament, it’s not about luck: you’re simply not qualified to even enter the preliminaries of the void tournament.”

Percy creased his borrowed brow, pondering over the implications. If this had been his previous time possessing Kassorith, these rules would have probably screwed him. His host simply hadn’t been as strong as a Violet, and they had only managed to climb through the regional tournament by fully leveraging their advantages.

Thankfully, things were different now. Percy was sure that they were more than powerful enough to pass at least three of the five tests.

“How many contestants should we expect?”

“There are plenty of lesser springs in the Void Hand, but they don’t get to participate. Only ten regional champions qualify every year from the weaker greater springs, as well as fifty from each of the four founding worlds, for a total of around five hundred competitors from each grade. The actual number of participants fluctuates wildly since they’re not obligated to join immediately, but there are usually

somewhere between three and seven hundred. Only a quarter of them typically make it to the second round, and they're mostly from the founding worlds."

Percy wasn't sure whether to be happy about this or not. Just by passing a few tests he would leapfrog over as many as five hundred people, yet those who remained would be the best of the best.

"What about the second round?"

"You'll be separated into eight groups, each containing fifteen to twenty-five participants. You'll need to fight against everyone once, as well as compete in a couple of special contests, slowly amassing points over several weeks. Losing a single match won't disqualify you, but you still need to win most of them, since only the top two performers will make it to the elimination round."

This honestly sounded quite gruelling, though it was clearly another method that the organizers used to purge the element of luck from the competition.

Percy would have preferred not to spend several months in this tournament, yet he understood that it was ultimately a small price to pay given the opportunities that he would have access to.

"Are there any rewards for the first two rounds?" he couldn't help but ask, some greed spilling into his voice.

"Of course. You are eligible for a single prize for getting through the preliminaries and another for making the top half of your group. There's also a third reward for making the top two in your group. From then on, you get one more for each victory during the elimination rounds, not including the Void Decree."

Percy was practically drooling by now, as was Kassorith and Micky. He didn't think it would be easy to rank first in his group, but he would have to make it to second place at least if he wanted the Decree, in addition to winning an extra match after that.

This would earn him a minimum of four prizes!

Judging by how good the stuff on Thess'kala had been, he could hardly fathom what would be on offer this time. "Do you have any idea what sorts of things we can expect?"

Lanthaniel laughed. "Only the best stuff. You can claim Decrees from across the entire alliance, first-generation leaves, private bodyguards at the Clear grade, and exclusive rights to entire countries…"

Percy's eyes widened as the list went on. It was possible to get demigods as bodyguards?! With a prize like that, Percy wouldn't even have to worry about Machaon, nor anyone else on Remior!

Of course, he knew that most of these rewards weren't applicable to him. Even if he could have claimed these bodyguards, he wasn't shortsighted enough to waste his rewards on things that didn't make him stronger. Still, just the idea that they were on the table was absurd.

'I guess we're going for leaves and Decrees?' Micky asked, opting to include Kassorith in their conversation.

'I think so.' Percy nodded. 'We'll have to fish out the ones that we're most likely to bring back home - I don't know how many of those we'll find: but if we can get them to affect both us and Kassorith at the same time, we might not have to take turns picking rewards like we did during the regional tournament.'

This was crazy.

After sending out so many clones, Percy had only ever gotten his hands on a total of six Decrees. Hell, he'd already had two of them before even leaving Remior, so he'd only found four during his travels.

They were among the most precious things out there, and yet Lanthaniel had just told him that he could potentially earn the same amount from a single competition: without even including its ultimate prize.

The leaves were a little trickier because Percy would have to share them with his host and could potentially earn them elsewhere, though they were too valuable to discard out of hand.

'It'll depend on what's available and how many rewards we earn...'

Suffice to say, nobody was in the mood to resume training after that, so they spent the next few days talking about the prizes and outlining their requirements. Lanthaniel didn't bother them at first, though he did eventually interrupt their daydreaming with a most anticipated message.

"We're here."

Chapter 625: Station

"Before I let you out of my internal world, we need to get your escape plan sorted out. I won't be able to remain by your side during the tournament, so this is our last chance to talk about this," Lanthaniel said.

"After the finals are over, the top eight performers will undergo the ritual to acquire the Void Decree. Hopefully you'll be among them. Even if you're not, it's best that you don't try to flee the planet sooner than that, or you'll put me in a tough spot. There will be a short break between the ritual and the award ceremony. You need to pick the most private location that you can find and open a portal to the Vault. I doubt that people will leave you alone after the tournament, so you might never get another opportunity."

"What about you?" Percy asked.

He didn't know Lanthaniel well, yet he couldn't help being a little worried about the god whose internal world he had spent the past three months living in. Perhaps he shouldn't have allowed himself to get too attached to one of Metatron's henchmen, but since Percy had already agreed to cooperate with the titan, he planned to do so earnestly.

"I'll flee right as the ceremony starts: which should be shortly after you're gone. There won't be nearly as many eyes on me, and even if there are, I'm a god. It'll be difficult for even those in the Elemental Acquisition stage to stop me from activating Metatron's Decree. Still, I'd rather not give them enough time to prepare a proper trap."

Percy nodded grimly as he shifted his attention to his host. 'Do you also have the Decree?'

'I do,' the Thess'kalan confirmed. 'We'll have two shots at opening the portal if there's any trouble. I would advise you not to try anything funny though. Metatron won't be happy if you flee by yourself and leave me stranded.'

‘You’ve got some nerve telling me that.’ Percy snorted. ‘But you don’t have to worry: I’m not going to screw you over if you don’t.’

Okay… Percy would be lying if he said that he hadn’t considered it, yet he knew that betraying Kassorith without a good reason would be beyond stupid, even if that was precisely what the Thess’kalan deserved. Leaving him here to die would be the equivalent of slapping the titan’s face: something that Percy would rather avoid.

Oblivious to their internal conversation, Lanthaniel opened a portal in front of them, letting them out of the small desert as his words echoed in Kassorith’s ears again.

“Ah, and one more thing. If you have to refer to me by name out there, make sure to call me ‘Lanthos’. ‘Lanthaniel’ is the name I picked upon joining the Vault.”

Percy had wondered about that, having spotted a pattern between names such as ‘Gabriel’ and ‘Cassiel’, though he had assumed that this naming convention was reserved solely for the natives of the artificial world.

To his knowledge, nobody had asked his former hosts: those like Leo and Tlaloc that he had previously brought to the Vault: to choose a new one. Evidently, this was another area where gods received special treatment, and he wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

‘Do you think that Metatron will change your name to Perciel if you ever join him as a god?’ Micky asked, clearly finding this hilarious.

‘All the more reason to not let things come to that… Mickiel,’ Percy joked back.

Not being privy to their brief exchange, Kassorithiel had already exited the god’s internal world. Slithering onto firm ground for the first time in months, Percy instantly appreciated being able to breathe without having to constantly filter dust out of the air.

Even with his willpower tucked in, his Sage’s Pond expanded to every corner of a mostly enclosed space, feeding all sorts of information about his surroundings into his mind.

Before focusing on anything else, Percy carefully examined his escort. The god's horns had shifted to a deep crimson colour, indicating that the powder had worked for the deity. Percy was admittedly a bit conflicted about this.

'Maybe selling him the material was a mistake, but at least I'll be two hundred thousand credits richer now…'

It was too late for regrets anyway, so he shrugged his concerns off, turning his attention outwards.

They were in a large metallic room with colourful runes pulsing softly across the walls and ceiling, strongly reminding Percy of the Vault. The symbols were written in a different language, however, the enchantments feeling slightly less potent than Metatron's.

Evidently, the technological level of the artificial world was more than a match for even the peak factions: or at least the Void Hand: though the difference wasn't huge. Maybe it wasn't all that surprising that Metatron could compete with the much larger alliance even as a solitary genius, considering the fact that he was the only god known to have comprehended a concept associated with magiscript.

'I'm sure that they beat him in every other important metric,' Micky said, having clearly guessed Percy's thoughts.

Percy nodded, though he didn't comment on that. More importantly, he realized that the room they were currently in had a floor and a ceiling, but only three walls. Its fourth side was wide open behind them, their senses stretching for hundreds of metres past some artificial boundary. And there was absolutely nothing beyond that point!

There were no people, no objects, no floor, and not even any air!

Glancing back in alarm, Percy saw mostly darkness, with a few stars glowing dimly in the distance. The only reason his host could breathe was because the enchantments appeared to box the available air inside the 'room', keeping it pressurized and preventing the oxygen from leaking.

“Are we in outer space?!” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Sort of. This is indeed a space station, though it’s located just above the planet where the tournament will take place,” Lanthaniel said. “Follow me. Everything will make sense soon.”

The hulking deity walked towards the wall opposite the opening with heavy steps. Pulling a golden emblem out of his internal world, he pressed it against the wall, waiting a few seconds for the metal to part into a large entrance.

Slithering behind his escort, Kassorith grabbed a similar pentagonal badge pinned to the side of his tunic opposite his spatial device, copying Lanthaniel’s actions. The Thess’kalan’s emblem was amethyst-coloured rather than golden, though it depicted the same image of a hand. It was naturally the ticket to the void tournament that Percy had previously stolen and recently returned to his host.

On the other side of the door, their bland, metallic surroundings gave way to stylish walls of varnished wood that wouldn’t be out of place on Remior. A series of elegant chandeliers hung across the ceiling; pots filled with strange alien flowers decorating either side of a long hallway that stretched far beyond the limits of Percy’s vision.

However, the fashionable décor was hardly the most interesting thing about the corridor.

The floor was made of fully transparent: probably-reinforced glass: giving every visitor a clear view of the breathtaking scenery beneath their feet. A giant planet unfolded countless kilometres below the station: a colossal orb dressed in a patchwork of vibrant green continents and deep blue oceans.

Scattered across the landmasses, several darker spots specked with thousands of tiny lights stood out, indicating the presence of bustling cities that were undoubtedly far larger than any Percy had visited. If he squinted hard enough, he could even make out the highways connecting those centres of civilization like a dense network of grey veins.

“This is Marador Prime, the main planet of one of the four founding factions,” Lanthaniel explained. Not wasting any time, he began walking through the long hallway, gesturing for Kassorith and Percy to follow. “See that large city floating in the middle of the ocean?”

Percy nodded as his gaze landed on the spot where the god was pointing. “Isn’t it an inconvenient location for a city?”

Lanthaniel shrugged. “They’ve built it there mostly as a status symbol rather than for any practical reasons. It’s called Maradion: the planet’s capital. That’s where you’ll be competing later.”

Kassorith didn’t seem quite as surprised as Percy, probably having been aware of at least some of this information. Even so, his heart was pounding faster. Despite having been part of the interstellar alliance for most of his life, this was clearly the Thess’kalan’s first time visiting another planet.

“Why didn’t we head there directly?” Percy asked, finding it a little strange that they had to stop at the space station first.

“We can’t. Specifically, I can’t. Any deity that wasn’t born on Marador Prime cannot get any closer than this. The space station is the designated spot to drop off our mortals.”

“Seriously?” Percy asked, creasing his borrowed brow. “You can’t even enter with permission from the natives?”

He’d already known that gods lost the ability to step foot on foreign worlds the moment they ascended to the Concept realm, though he’d never imagined that this limitation was so absolute.

“We wish. Unfortunately, the restriction doesn’t come from the local gods, so even they are unable to make an exception for their guests. Even their fellow Maradorian gods who originate from other worlds cannot visit their kinsmen.”

Percy found the revelation shocking. He wanted to ask Lanthaniel whether he knew the reason for this strange rule, though he opted to focus on more pressing issues.

“How safe is this for us? I was under the impression that the Void Hand isn’t very united. Are all these factions okay leaving their most talented mortals on a potentially hostile planet without protection?”

“The alliance does have its issues, but everyone understands that it’s a necessary evil. They wouldn’t dare to do anything dumb,” Lanthaniel explained. “Besides, the other founding factions house some important locations of their own, so they aren’t without leverage. Even on the off chance that the Maradorians go crazy one day, losing a single batch of mortals will be the least of our problems.”

Percy pondered over the god’s words as they traversed the long hallway, feeling like he understood the complicated dynamics of the grand alliance a little better by the time they reached the end.

Eventually, they stepped into a new room, and they weren’t alone this time. There were dozens of groups of various sizes seemingly waiting in a queue for registration, each containing both mortals and gods.

Percy tried not to stare at any of them directly, though he had no qualms about scanning everyone with his newest Wild Art, studying his soon-to-be opponents with great curiosity.

Chapter 626: Disadvantaged

The registration room was decorated in the same style as the previous corridor: with wooden walls, potted plants, and a transparent floor through which Marador Prime was clearly visible in all its cosmic glory. It seemed like this was a recurring theme across the space station, though Percy didn’t blame the Maradorians for wanting to showcase their world: it truly looked like a beautiful place.

Due to his borrowed eyes having already feasted upon the exotic spectacle, he was more interested in the groups of aliens queueing up for registration. Some of these men and women were tall, others short; scaled, furred or bare, with all sorts of bizarre yet common traits that he had already encountered countless times in his adventures.

Rather than hyper-focusing on the racial features of his prospective rivals, Percy was curious about the composition of their teams. Each contained only a single deity: most likely the one responsible for escorting them safely to the space station: and, generally speaking, no more than forty mortals split between the Blue, Violet and White grades.

That alone wasn’t very surprising, since Lanthaniel had already explained that most member-factions of the Void Hand were allowed ten slots per year for each grade, with some regional champions saving their tickets for later.

However, the groups with fewer than five mortals did look a little out of place. Was it a coincidence that their factions had sent so few people this year?

Stranger still was the presence of a couple of duplicate groups: teams of the same species accompanied by different gods and standing separately in the queue. Tossing Lanthaniel a subtle, inquisitive glance, it didn't take Percy long to hear the explanation whispered in his host's ears.

"Every faction is obligated to send an official entourage that all the mortals without major backing are allowed to join. However, it's not rare for some to be escorted here privately by their mentor or a god employed by their family: much like what we are doing."

Percy nodded in understanding, though he realized that Kassorith was still the only one accompanied by a god from a different faction. Metatron had insisted that things like this tended to happen in the alliance, though it clearly wasn't as common as the titan would have him believe.

Even worse, the species of Kassorith's escort was far from his only peculiarity, so several pairs of eyes had scrutinized them closely ever since they entered the room.

'What? Have you assholes never seen a red Thess'kalan before?' Percy wanted to ask, not very happy about being the centre of everyone's attention, yet he kept those thoughts to himself.

Kassorith and Lanthaniel stopped at the back of the queue, waiting for their turn like everyone else. The people in the other groups had clearly seen Thess'kalans before, so they spent several minutes examining Percy's strange host with great interest, though most of them eventually grew bored.

Unfortunately, however, an entourage of about twenty of Kassorith's kinsmen was standing about a dozen spots ahead of Percy's small group, and they weren't nearly as quick to drop the matter, for obvious reasons.

Whether or not they had recognized Kassorith specifically, the sight of one of their own having betrayed their world and practically stolen one of their limited tickets to hand to a rival faction clearly wasn't appreciated.

That said, the cocktail of emotions marring their scaled faces contained more than anger or disgust. Percy didn't miss the spark of greed present in their slit pupils as they probably wondered what Kassorith had done to his scales.

Either way, it was best to avoid unnecessary trouble, so Percy internally debated whether to ignore them or ask his host to apologize for his crimes: to hopefully diffuse tension.

In the end, Kassorith did neither, yet his kinsmen stopped looking at him of their own accord at some point. To their credit, they must have figured that putting the traitor in his place wasn't worth getting kicked out of the prestigious competition before it even started.

Exhaling in relief, Percy went back to discreetly scanning the other groups, soon finding another team that stood out. He naturally didn't recognize their species, but this was the only group with over a hundred members. Suffice to say, he was under no illusion that they had just happened to have hoarded so many tickets to use in a single year.

'Are they…?' he asked his host, getting a mental nod back.

'Denytes. One of the founding factions. We'll have to pay them more attention than everyone else, as I expect that we'll have to beat at least a couple of these monsters to make the top eight,' Kassorith said, having clearly noticed which group Percy was talking about.

The Denytes looked somewhat similar to humans, though their skin was fairer and their statures lither and more feminine, even though there had to be at least some males in the group. They were shorter than the average sapient too, though not quite as short as Cassiel's people: the green-skinned species that lived in the Vault.

More importantly, their hair was rather unique. Their manes were long, vibrant and bright, practically burning atop their scalps more like flames than mundane hair.

'No… it's not fire either,' Percy realized, creasing his host's brow. 'Is that… concentrated mana?'

Each Denyte's head shone with a different hue, which Percy instantly connected to the mana types inside their cores. Most of their manes burned in the familiar colours of common and composite affinities, though there were more than a couple with rare mana types.

The magical hair flowed erratically, yet not a single mote appeared to leak away. It looked like the mana was contained within some invisible membrane that could freely bend, stretch and twist, but never break.

'The mana is of the same grade as their cores, but there's twice as much of it in their hair,' Percy concluded after studying them carefully for a few minutes.

'Indeed,' Kassorith confirmed. 'This is the result of one of their most famous Decrees. Luckily, this secondary mana storage only affects their capacity: not their regeneration: but starting each fight with three times the reserves of their opponents is still nothing to scoff at.'

'Interesting…' Percy said. 'Can we also get this Decree from the tournament?'

Having glowing hair would admittedly look ridiculous, but Percy wasn't going to miss out on such a powerful ability just because of its appearance. Sadly, his host was quick to burst his bubble.

'I'm afraid not. It's one of those Decrees that target all the newborns of their species. They couldn't pass it to outsiders even if they wanted to: and I'm pretty sure they don't. The founding factions all have at least one powerful Decree that is unique to them. It's one of the secrets behind their success,' Kassorith explained.

Percy sighed, having expected this. This was probably common among the peak factions. In fact, the Moirais' Decree was pretty much the same thing, though the Void Hand had managed to recreate a version of it to grant to their members on top of their existing power. He and Kassorith would have to overcome these unfair advantages if they wanted to climb high enough to earn a few new Decrees of their own.

Studying the Denytes a little longer, he noticed yet another unsettling peculiarity. There were thirteen mortals who had two separate flames on their scalps, flaring in opposite directions. Each sported a different colour, though it wasn't any smaller than those of their kinsmen that only possessed one.

‘Dual affinities? Don’t tell me there’s so many who already have the Void Decree as well?!’

Scanning their abdomens, it didn’t take Percy long to confirm his suspicions. Some of their second cores were still a grade or two lower than those in their sternums, but almost half had already caught up.

There were two Denytes with twin Blue cores that he and Kassorith would have to compete against, and he wouldn’t be surprised if the other founding factions had just as many mages at that level, or even more.

‘Shit!’ he thought, failing to suppress a curse.

All of a sudden, the goal of climbing to the top eight seemed even more daunting, though Percy should have probably seen that coming. People were allowed to compete in the tournament multiple times, and the Void Decree was offered to the winners every single year. It only made sense that a big chunk of the participants would have already earned it during a previous competition.

Still, this was horrible news for him and Kassorith.

To qualify for the Void Decree in the first place, one would have to reach the top eight with a single core. This meant that every two-cored mage in the tournament was a monster capable of defeating other monsters even under a severe handicap. And once they joined the ranks of their two-cored peers, the gulf separating these monsters from those less talented only widened.

Percy had previously thought that the Void Hand was somewhat generous for offering the Decree to dozens of new mortals every single year, but he might have greatly overestimated how often the supreme spell reached new hands.

For all he knew, it was entirely possible that the same group of participants tended to occupy the top spots in the competition for decades or even centuries at a time. For anyone new to break through and claim the Decree for themselves, they would either have to be even more talented, or they would have to wait for their seniors to move on to the next category: or skip a tournament.

‘Well… that sure sucks,’ Micky said. ‘Usually, we’re the ones who have more cores than our opponents.’

Alas, there was nothing they could do but grit their gums and hope for the best.

With their mood completely soured, Percy and his companions patiently waited for their turn. More groups arrived at the space station, joining the queue behind them. Most flashed them the same curious gazes as the people from earlier, though it never took long for the newcomers to move on.

Eventually, Kassorith and Lanthaniel reached a counter that wasn't manned by a person. There was just a flat, glowing crystal that reminded Percy of the screens from the Vault. It contained a simple questionnaire for his host to fill in.

It asked for information such as a broad overview of his abilities, the method by which he had acquired his ticket to the tournament, and his relationship to the god currently escorting him.

Sneaking a glance at the towering deity, Percy assumed that Lanthaniel had to answer a similar set of questions. He had no idea whether there was magic like Nesha's Truthseeker bloodline in place to verify the truth of their answers, though the questions were thankfully vague enough that Kassorith didn't have to outright lie to get through them.

As soon as they were done, they had to scan their ticket once more, probably to link it to their responses. Percy guessed that this was a necessary step for turning the objects into proper identification badges to use during their stay on the space station and Marador Prime.

The original tickets could freely be traded, so they weren't linked to any specific person prior to this point. If Percy and Kassorith wanted to access their accommodations and rewards later, they would need something more official than a blank ticket that anyone could use.

With that out of the way, they were allowed into the next room: which might not be the right term for what this place was. It was more of a giant shopping centre, with hundreds of people: both mortals and gods: strolling around leisurely. It was full of luxurious restaurants and expensive-looking stores, the sight causing Kassorith's eyes to widen once more.

"We've got a couple of days to kill before we have to part ways," Lanthaniel said, having clearly noticed their interest. "Do you want to check this place out?"

Chapter 627: Scouting

At first, Percy was quite excited to spend a few days shopping inside the space station, thinking that he might find another way of strengthening his host before the competition.

After learning about the special Decrees that the members of the founding factions were born with, as well as the second cores that so many of them had awakened, he realized that he and Kassorith would need all the power they could get if they wanted to make it far enough into the event.

Lanthaniel hadn't mentioned spells, mutations, alchemic principles or equipment being available as rewards in the tournament, so Percy had assumed that anything less than a Decree wasn't valuable enough to make it into the prize pool.

That suited him just fine, since he wouldn't want to waste his limited rewards on anything less potent than divine magic either, yet he wouldn't mind buying something useful from the shops. After all, he'd claimed some rather interesting rewards from the regional tournament on Thess'kala, and a peak faction like the Void Hand was bound to have even better stuff.

Sadly, it soon became clear that he had misunderstood the purpose of this place.

None of the shops sold weapons or powerful magical objects, focusing mostly on everyday items like elegant clothes, expensive perfumes, flashy jewellery, and other products of decorative or recreational value.

Simply put, the entire space station was more of a lounge for tourists: a cultural hub for guests to unwind and enjoy themselves for a few days before the start of the event.

The revelation initially left Percy disappointed, though Micky eventually convinced him to give this place a chance. They rarely took time off from training and never shopped for things that wouldn't directly make them stronger, so this would be quite a novel experience for them both if they allowed themselves to have some fun. It wasn't everyday they got to visit a place like this, nor did they have anything better to do.

The good news was that those who were here for the tournament: which was almost everyone on the space station: were allowed three meals a day for free from any restaurants of their choosing as a generous display of hospitality from the Maradorians.

Even the prices in the shops were more than affordable… well… relatively speaking. They might be prohibitively expensive to mortals at the lower grades, but the void tournament was an event for the proudest sons and daughters of the alliance. The weakest of them were Blues as powerful as Violets: people who would be treated like royalty anywhere in the universe, so none of them was supposed to have any trouble buying whatever they wanted.

Of course, Percy didn't have any money whatsoever, but Kassorith luckily did, as the Void Hand's currency was apparently uniform across all of its member-factions, including Thess'kala. The same was true for their language, fortunately, which was why Percy didn't have any issues understanding these people so long as he possessed Kassorith's body.

Despite knowing that his money would practically become worthless the moment they escaped from Marador Prime, the red-scaled prick still refused to lend Percy and Micky some at first, though they eventually managed to guilt trip him into sharing after reminding him of the mutation they had recently given him for free.

Or well… it might be more apt to call it coercion than a guilt trip, since Kassorith didn't exactly have much of a conscience.

Either way, Percy wasn't interested in clothes or accessories, though he did find some trinkets that piqued his fancy. He ended up purchasing a few devices meant for recording and playing sounds.

The enchantments on them weren't anything special: he could probably design something better with the Vault's magiscript if he wanted: but the technology behind the objects wasn't the point. He bought dozens of discs that contained songs from across the alliance, thinking that they would make for great gifts for himself and his loved ones.

When all was said and done, Percy had to admit that it was nice to truly relax for the first time in Phoebe-knew how long, though that was not to say that he hadn't done anything productive during his stay at the space station.

While he and his companions had been busy browsing through the alien stores, he'd taken every opportunity to spy on any Blues unlucky enough to cross his path, learning as much as possible about his prospective rivals.

He hadn't seen any Maradorians on the space station, so he was operating under the assumption that they were already on their planet, with even those who didn't originate from Marador Prime having likely arrived earlier than everyone else. However, he did meet plenty of people from the remaining founding factions.

Other than the Denytes from earlier, Kassorith had introduced him to the Ollorians: some of the ugliest creatures that he had ever laid eyes upon. Percy generally didn't like imposing his subjective beauty standards onto other races, nor did he enjoy judging anyone for their looks, but even he had to admit that these people looked objectively disgusting.

They vaguely resembled humanoids, but their features were deformed beyond reason. It clearly wasn't a natural phenomenon either, since every Ollorian looked different from the rest, and their bodies were completely asymmetrical.

Some had a missing leg or an arm too many; others had an eye larger than the other, a mouth without teeth, a crooked nose with three nostrils, or a pointy ear sticking out of their forehead. And those were just the unsettling configurations that Percy had the right words to describe.

Kassorith explained that this was all the result of their ancestral Decree.

Apparently, the Ollorians were among the oldest greater springs in the universe, and the titan who had cast their signature Decree had done so from back when they had still been a lesser spring, millions of years ago.

And he had done a sloppy job at it, to say the least.

The Decree had technically always been functional, since it had fulfilled its primary purpose from day one. It greatly increased the potency of the Ollorians' spells, giving them a huge advantage against others of the same grade.

Sadly for them, the original version had come with… certain drawbacks that they'd had to learn to live with. Percy was familiar with blighted bloodlines such as the one that members of House Tantalus had once possessed, though this was his first brush with what he would describe as a blighted Decree.

For better or worse, the Ollorians were far more developed nowadays, so they had supposedly managed to iron out the wrinkles in their Decree hundreds of thousands of years ago. Unfortunately, the flawed prototype that their titan had cursed them with had done lasting damage to their lineage that still haunted them to this day.

Upon learning about all of that, Percy was glad for once that this particular Decree wouldn't be offered among the rewards of the competition. Fixed or not, he would rather not take such a risk, preferring not to look like a misshapen blob of flesh the next time his girlfriend saw him.

Despite the Ollorians' appearances, Kassorith had assured Percy and Micky that they weren't any weaker than the other founding factions. After all, if their Decree hadn't been an extremely powerful one, they would have never inflicted it upon their people.

The third major faction present on the space station were the Inimits. Percy would describe them as bird people not too dissimilar from Huehuans, though their beaks were shorter and curvier, like those of hawks. Rather than a second pair of arms, these people had a pair of brown wings sticking out of their backs.

Percy had to admit that he was somewhat jealous of them.

As a child, he had always dreamt of advancing to a high enough grade that he could fly: a dream that would have remained unfulfilled if he hadn't discovered his bloodline, since he would have never grown as powerful as he was.

Thankfully, he could even fly using just his willpower now, but it was one thing to have to grow as powerful as a Violet to obtain this ability, and another thing entirely to be born with wings that even a Red-born child could use to soar through the clouds.

More importantly, the ancestral Decree of the Inimits was among the most coveted in the alliance, which was saying something given how powerful all of them were. It allowed them to infuse meaning into their feathers, imparting them with potent enchantments without the need for runes.

Lanthaniel assured Percy that the enchantments were weaker than the Vault's magiscript, though they weren't much worse than other runecrafting languages. Considering that the Inimits could apply a

multitude of effects at a moment's notice: much like Percy could: without having to study any complex subjects, they were an extremely resourceful people.

All things considered, he and Kassorith had their work cut out for them. Especially since they'd already seen six people with twin Blue cores and four more with a Blue and a Green one among the founding factions.

Adding the Maradorians that weren't on the space station or any lone geniuses that they might have missed, and even making the top sixteen was starting to look like quite the challenge, let alone the top eight. If they got unlucky and too many talented people ended up in their group during the second round, they might not even make it to the actual tournament.

With a heavy heart, Percy and his host bid Lanthaniel farewell on the third day, stepping on a teleportation platform that beamed them straight onto the planet's capital.

Whether they were ready for it or not, the void tournament was about to begin.

Chapter 628: Sixth Circle

It soon became clear that the architectural style of the capital was just like that of the space station: or rather, it was probably the other way around, since the city likely predated the orbiting structure.

The interior of the building Kassorith was teleported into was decorated by wooden walls and antiquated pottery, though the exterior of not just that building but also every other in the area was made of bland metal adorned with glowing runes. Maradorians seemed to favour this dichotomy between a modern and practical exterior with a cozy and traditional interior.

Surprisingly, the ground was also the same as that of the space station. Be it the floor inside the buildings or the streets outside, they were made of thick, transparent glass that allowed one to view the breathtaking scenery beneath their feet.

Only, instead of seeing the whole planet from above, it was the depths of the Maradorian ocean that were visible this time. The dark waters were illuminated by glowing orbs enchanted to float at fixed intervals, surrounded by marine creatures of all shapes and sizes.

‘Wow, these people haven’t spared any expenses to set all of this up, have they?’ Micky mused. ‘Even for a peak faction, building this city must have consumed a lot of time and resources.’

Percy nodded. ‘I suppose that a display like this is the gentlest way possible to remind the lesser members of the alliance of their place, so that nobody gets any funny ideas of revolting against the founding factions.’

There was no question that the floating capital was beautiful, but it was probably as much of a political play as it was an expression of art.

Another detail that had been readily apparent since they stepped tail on the planet was that ambient mana was even denser here than it had been on Thess’kala. Percy was pretty sure by now that this was caused by another common type of Decree that was popular among greater springs: much like those granting bloodlines or Statuses.

He couldn’t wait for Remior to develop one of their own, though Percy knew that it would be a very long time before he was personally qualified to cast one. Humanity’s hopes rested with the Divine Order for the foreseeable future. If they got lucky, one of their current gods or demigods would become a titan sometime in the next few centuries.

Regardless, he and his host hadn’t come here for sightseeing.

Thankfully, the tournament’s participants were greeted by attendants right outside the building they had been teleported in. Percy finally got a chance to examine the natives of this planet as they led Kassorith and the others to their next destination.

His first thought about Maradorians was that they looked like frog people. Their skin was smooth and glossy. It wasn’t covered in granules and warts but vibrant, colourful patterns that varied greatly from person to person.

Judging from their webbed digits that reminded Percy of Enki’s, these were the first people he had seen since Atlantis that could live underwater. That said, they clearly weren’t an exclusively aquatic people, as they didn’t seem to have any issue walking on solid ground or breathing air. Furthermore, Percy had seen plenty of cities scattered across the planet’s landmasses before descending to the surface.

‘They’re amphibians then,’ he concluded. ‘Must be convenient to be able to colonize every square centimetre of their planet.’

Kassorith had informed him of their ancestral Decree earlier, and it was another rather powerful one. Every Maradorian was apparently born with a second, lesser magical affinity that was denoted by the colour of their skin.

This secondary affinity wasn’t one that they could directly wield, but it granted them the same enhanced resistance to the corresponding element that a mage with that affinity would normally possess. It also made it easier for them to convert mana of that type to their own, which resulted in slightly faster mana regeneration at all times.

Finally, their lesser affinity provided them with some unique benefits in the Concept realm. While it didn’t allow them to directly infuse an additional element into their internal world during their ascension, it gave them a much easier time branching into that mana type later, during the Elemental Acquisition stage.

This might not sound like much, since it would “only” save them a few hundred millennia of effort, but Maradorians were universally thought to be among the races with the highest chance of acquiring a rare element and stepping beyond the known limits of the Concept realm: provided that they had the right lesser affinity for it.

It hadn’t happened yet, but every god in the cosmos was basically competing to get there first, and these people had quite the advantage over everyone else.

Either way, their secondary affinity wasn’t correlated with that of their cores at all. A majority of Maradorians were born with different primary and lesser affinities, though some unlucky few were cursed with the same element twice, which gave them no benefit whatsoever.

Luckily for them, their secondary affinity was also semi-hereditary, meaning that they had a small chance of inheriting one from their parents. This apparently played a big role in Maradorian culture, greatly affecting the way they selected their mating partners. It was usually better for them to marry someone who didn’t share any primary or secondary affinities, to maximize the odds of their children manifesting a favourable combination.

‘Well… it’s a useful Decree for them, but it sounds like it would be more of a hassle for us,’ Percy told Micky. ‘I guess that it’s not such a huge loss we won’t be able to obtain this one…’

Considering how many affinities they already had, and how easy it was to obtain more through their familiars and aspects, getting an extra lesser affinity wouldn’t be much of a blessing. Especially if they didn’t have any control of it and were likely to end up with a duplicate element that painted their skin into a weird colour for nothing.

The attendants eventually led the group to a huge building a few blocks down the street, motioning for them to scan their identification badges and enter. Once inside, Percy realized that this was some kind of stadium where the first phase of the competition would be held.

The building was segmented into several smaller sections. The attendants asked the participants to form several queues that matched the number of rooms in the stadium, escorting the mortals to the assessment centres one at a time.

Thankfully, Kassorith was smart enough to slither near the front of his queue as it was forming, so it only took about an hour for his turn to come. A female attendant with a Green core and a water affinity, yet bright orange skin that would indicate a lesser affinity for fire, led them to their room.

“The first test will check your durability. You will have to stand in the middle of the room and endure round after round of increasingly powerful attacks. You are allowed to use your mana and willpower to defend yourself in any way you please, but you can’t dodge the attacks. If you move outside the indicated circle, you will automatically fail the test. If you use any external equipment or potions, you will be disqualified from the tournament,” she helpfully explained.

Percy couldn’t help but crease his host’s forehead. “What about equipment forged out of my mana and enchanted personally by me?”

“It’s allowed as long as you produce everything during the test. Anything that you have prepared beforehand is against the rules,” the attendant replied, her expression remaining flat. This was probably a common question.

“And what’s the condition for passing the test?” Kassorith asked, taking control of his mouth back.

“Since you are a Blue, you will begin the test with five circles glowing around you. The sixth one will slowly light up as you endure increasingly powerful attacks. You need to last long enough for it to grow as bright as the other five circles, indicating that your durability is that of a Sixth Circle mage.”

Kassorith frowned, clearly unfamiliar with the term. Percy and Micky hadn’t come across it either. Noticing their confusion, the corners of the attendant’s lips curled up slightly as she answered the unspoken question.

“I can see that you’re from Thess’kala. If I’m not mistaken, your people refer to Blues that can fight against Violets as elite disciples, Violets that can fight against Whites as grand elders, and so on. Terms like that are popular among lesser and greater springs, though they are somewhat tedious for peak factions.”

Percy mentally nodded, understanding what the woman meant. Anywhere else, people who could fight above their grade were rare, and they were usually limited to a single step. However, peak factions had plenty of people like that, as well as those who could fight two or even three grades above their own. Clearly, it wasn’t practical to come up with a different name for each combination, so a more streamlined system was necessary for classifying a person’s strength.

“On Marador Prime we use the universal standard that those accursed Moirai have popularized. As hateful as they are, their system is admittedly quite practical. According to this standard, a regular Red is considered a First Circle mage, an Orange is a Second Circle mage, and so on, up to a regular demigod who would be classified as an Eighth Circle mage. However, as we all know, a mage’s strength isn’t always limited to their grade. A Blue capable of fighting against Violets is a Sixth Circle mage, which is the requirement for passing these assessments.”

Kassorith nodded, accepting her explanation. “From what I’ve been told, participants capable of fighting two grades above their own often appear in the void tournament. In my case, that would mean Blues as strong as Whites, so… Seventh Circle mages?”

“Correct,” the attendant replied. “At the upper end of the spectrum, a Tenth Circle mage would refer to a demigod who can fight two grades above their own, or a White who can fight three. That is generally considered the absolute limit of a mortal’s strength.”

“What about paragons?” the Thess’kalan protested.

“Paragons, or demigods who can fight three grades above their own do emerge from time to time, though they are extremely rare even among peak factions. Since they are as powerful as newly ascended gods, anything from the Eleventh Circle onwards is indicative of divine strength.”

“I see,” Kassorith replied. “So I need to meet the standard of a Sixth Circle mage in three out of five tests to qualify for the second round, but I’m guessing that this won’t be enough to get me very far into the tournament.”

“I’m afraid not,” the woman confirmed. “Unless you can display Seventh Circle strength in at least two tests, you are unlikely to even reach the knockout phase: let alone win. You are free to continue the test after the sixth circle lights up if you wish to test your limits. The enchantments will protect you from any serious injuries but note that you will fail the assessment if the runes activate to save you before you pass.”

Kassorith thanked the attendant as she showed him into the room and closed the door behind him.

Percy suddenly felt more tense about the test. Durability was one of the areas where his host excelled due to his mutations and metal mana, so he hadn’t worried too much about passing this one. However, he now understood that merely reaching the sixth circle wouldn’t cut it. Unless they could push themselves all the way to the seventh, they might not stand a chance in the next round…

Chapter 629: Durability

The floor and walls of the assessment room were coated with metal and heavily enchanted, unlike the interior of other buildings that Percy had seen on Maradion. Evidently, even a peak faction had to make some concessions in their décor if they wished to push mages of the Sixth Circle or higher to their limits.

It was easy enough for Percy and Kassorith to locate the spot where they were supposed to stand. Like the attendant had said, there was a circle in the centre of the room that shone more brightly than the other runes.

It was over a dozen metres wide, which wasn’t that cramped, though Kassorith would have been hard-pressed to dodge the sorts of apocalyptic spells that could threaten Violets and Whites with so little space, even if the rules had allowed that.

Slithering into the enchantment with a shrug, the Thess'kalan watched four additional circles light up just outside the first, with the outline of one more faintly visible. At the same time, the remaining symbols inside the room flashed in an ominous red colour, indicating that the test was about to begin.

'I'll handle the first few rounds,' Percy said, allowing his domain to envelop his host's body. 'Use that time to produce and enchant as much metal mana as possible.'

Before his companions even got a chance to reply, colourful projectiles of all shapes and sizes began shooting at Kassorith from every direction, slamming into the invisible barrier protecting him and rattling Percy's willpower in the process.

Having used Obatala's Approval to lock his domain in its strongest state, he didn't have much trouble blocking the weakest spells that a Blue could unleash, though he knew that his domain wasn't strong enough to last until the Violet ones by itself.

Luckily, the others didn't waste the time that Percy had bought. Micky: who didn't have access to much willpower at the moment: decided to take control of their mana. Pouring some into a growing pool of liquid steel under their host's tail, he took a deep breath after another to replenish their reserves as quickly as he was consuming them.

Meanwhile, Kassorith took advantage of the Scribing trait and his own domain to engrave a few unit cells into the material, essentially using a version of Percy's Instantaneous Armament spell. The Thess'kalan hadn't been able to cast it before their reunion, but Percy had made sure to bring his host up to speed during their training inside Lanthaniel's internal world.

A few minutes later, Percy was no longer able to block the attacks with just his willpower.

Having finished drawing the first set of runes, Kassorith left Micky in charge of duplicating and spreading them across the accumulated metal through the self-repair enchantments. Freed from his previous task, the Thess'kalan lent his domain to Percy, buying him more time.

Eventually, even the second layer of willpower proved insufficient, so they had no choice but to fall back to the enchanted mana that they had generated. Luckily, Micky's preparations were already complete.

Between the wide pool outside their body and the contents of their core, they had amassed twice as much mana as Kassorith's normal capacity: which was about the best that Micky could have accomplished in so little time without a boosting art.

Percy gave the Huehuan control over half of his willpower, seizing about half of the mana in return. Micky used that to swiftly coat their host's body in a thin layer of enchanted steel. Meanwhile, Percy took the time to reforge the rest of the material into something more structurally sound.

The attacks which had already been powerful enough to penetrate the domains did so more easily with the strongest layer of willpower gone. Fortunately, they still posed no threat to the metallic barrier. Before Percy was even done reinforcing their armour, he noticed that the sixth circle had finally lit up completely, the outline of the seventh having appeared on the floor.

'Good job, everyone. I suppose this means that we've already passed the test, but don't give up just yet. We still need to do our best to reach the next level if possible. You've heard the lady: if we can't do that for at least two categories, we might as well forget about getting the Void Decree.'

Kassorith and Micky didn't say anything, though Percy could sense their resolve burning hot through their bond. They all understood that the durability test would be among the easiest for them, so they had to at least excel during this one.

The spells raining down on them grew larger, denser and more varied by the second. Some were thin and long like javelins, drilling deep into their defences. Others were blunt and heavy like meteors, trying to crush them entirely.

Percy distinctly noticed several affinities at play. All the common and composite ones were present, with even the occasional rare mana type tossed into the mix. Thankfully, the test wasn't throwing any soul or mind projectiles at them: they weren't a great fit for the sort of straightforward durability assessment that this was. However, the Maradorians hadn't shied away from the occasional blast of space mana, consuming entire chunks of Kassorith's enchanted armour on contact.

Whenever Percy spotted a black disk flying at them, he concentrated his domain to hopefully block it with just his willpower. Recovering it was a pain, but it was much faster to replenish compared to the enchanted metal mana that they had spent several minutes accumulating.

The difficulty of the assessment steadily rose as the number, frequency and strength of the projectiles climbed to a dangerous level. Luckily, Percy didn't have to worry about his host's life, since the room's enchantments would protect them from any fatal injuries, so he focused solely on enduring the onslaught of magic for as long as possible.

Before anyone knew it, all the metal that they had gathered: three times Kassorith's capacity by now: had been converted into a bulky structure that looked more like a multi-layered cocoon than armour. It was densely covered in potent enchantments inside-out. It obviously hampered their mobility severely, so it wouldn't be too useful in a real fight, but it was fine given the rules of the assessment.

Sadly, even if Kassorith and Percy concentrated their willpower in a small area, their joint domain was no longer powerful enough to block any individual spell. Consequently, they couldn't shield the metallic cocoon from the space mana. Even if that hadn't been the case, the structure was too large and the dark disks too numerous to stop them all.

Accepting that they were about to receive some damage, they changed their strategy entirely. They allowed their willpower to spread uniformly across the steel barrier, amplifying its structural integrity.

The cocoon was more than powerful enough to shrug off most attacks, though Percy and his companions inevitably lost a lot of steel whenever a blade of space mana landed.

Micky hadn't stopped gathering mana and expanding the barrier, but it was quickly turning into a losing battle. The structure's thickness had already plateaued and was beginning to shrink, meaning that they were on borrowed time.

A couple of minutes later, the armour had thinned to about twice Kassorith's capacity, and its degradation was accelerating by the second. The incoming projectiles had also grown powerful enough that the structural integrity enchantments were no longer enough to fully absorb the impacts.

Shockwaves rippled through the cocoon, reaching the Thess'kalan's body for the first time during the test.

'I think this is going well,' Percy said to encourage the others. 'At this rate, I'm sure that our mutations will keep us standing until the circle fully lights up.'

The rest of the assessment wasn't very suspenseful. The seventh circle had already been about three quarters of the way to completion, meaning that it didn't take long for them to reach the next milestone.

The metallic barrier kept shrinking as the projectiles grew heavier, but the domains became more effective as they focused on a smaller volume. Kassorith's scales also offered a lot more protection than the body of the average Blue. Even after they began to crack, his Greater Thess'kalan Physique and reinforced bones picked up the slack, buying him more time.

To Percy's great relief, the seventh circle eventually lit up completely, and the outline of the eighth one became visible.

They could have stopped right there, though they decided to push themselves just a bit longer. Things started getting quite dangerous about a minute after that, the incoming spells having already grown powerful enough to harm a weaker White.

Perhaps they could have lasted another minute if they really tried, since they also had Kassorith's bloodline to recover from any serious injuries, but Percy didn't see any point in going that far.

"That's enough," he yelled through a narrow opening at the top of the metallic cocoon: what little was left of it anyway. Thankfully, the room's enchantments were smart enough to recognize his voice and process his surrender, causing the violent storm of magic assaulting their defences to halt as suddenly as it had commenced.

Allowing himself to relax, Percy was honestly quite happy with their performance in the first test, yet he understood that their success wasn't completely replicable in a real fight.

A live opponent wouldn't wait for Kassorith to accumulate so much mana, nor would they give him a chance to manage his resources and slowly prepare a barrier like this. If Percy and his companions had abandoned their strategic approach and simply braced themselves against the attacks as they came, they would have still probably lit up the seventh circle, but they wouldn't have done it as comfortably as they had.

Worse still, he knew that their arsenal wouldn't be nearly this effective during the remaining tests…

Chapter 630: Domain, mana and agility

Percy noticed that one of the corners of the amethyst badge pinned to his host's tunic was glowing in a bright, white light. There was no mystery as to the reason behind this change, but he wasn't very pleased with the idea of everyone knowing that they had lit up the seventh circle during the durability assessment.

'Seriously? What's the point of conducting the tests in private rooms only to announce the results later?' he asked his companions with a grimace.

'This might be good for us,' Kassorith argued.

'How so?'

'Well… anyone who wants to know more about us can easily just look up the tricks we've used on Thess'kala. It's true that we've grown stronger in a bunch of ways, but the core of our skillset hasn't changed much,' the scaled man said. 'At least we now have a way of learning more about our opponents too, so it'll help us more than it hurts.'

Percy sighed, unable to refute his host's logic. Either way, they would have to fight over a dozen powerful opponents during the second round of the competition. It would have been impossible to keep their abilities hidden after the first couple of battles regardless.

Exiting the room, they were promptly picked up by the same female attendant from before. She proceeded to lead Kassorith to a different stadium for his second assessment, this one split into fewer, larger rooms, suggesting that the next test required more space.

The attendant explained that they would be evaluating Kassorith's domain this time. Apparently, this was a category that often stumped even the most talented participants, since there weren't that many ways to bolster one's willpower.

"We regularly see powerful mages who easily manage to light up not just the sixth, but also the seventh circle in most categories, only to be stuck in the fifth circle for this one," the orange-skinned Maradorian said. "Those who have two cores at the same grade have the greatest advantage during this assessment, but even that is typically insufficient: unless of course they happen to also possess a bloodline or Decree that further empowers their domain."

Percy nodded, thinking that this made sense. Luckily, he and his companions already had this particular assessment in the bag.

The test was fairly simple, and it wasn't nearly as violent as the previous one. Kassorith still had to stand within a small circle, though he wasn't allowed to use mana this time. He had to lift lots of heavy weights, strike moving targets, and solve various physical puzzles from afar using only his willpower.

The organizers clearly wanted to evaluate both the strength of his domain and his control over it.

Percy's willpower was already on par with a Violet's, since he had formed it while possessing a Blue and a Green core boosted by several instances of Circulation. The addition of Kassorith's willpower sealed the deal, allowing them to easily light the sixth circle up.

Unfortunately, they didn't have as many tricks up their sleeve as they had during the durability test, so they didn't get much further than that.

Technically, Percy did have a fully charged Zelesian bead inside his seal, but it would have probably taken all three of the artifacts to bolster his domain enough to reach the seventh circle. Besides, it was an external object, so it wasn't allowed in the tournament. Since he had no idea whether the Void Hand was aware of the bead's origins, he wouldn't want to reveal its existence either way.

The good news was that Percy was no longer worried about passing the preliminaries. It would take a miracle for them to fail all three of the remaining assessments. However, he still wanted to light up the seventh circle in at least one of them if possible, so that he would feel more secure about their odds in the next round.

As soon as the test was complete, he checked the ticket once more, noting that it hadn't changed this time. Other than the previous corner that was still glowing in a white colour, the other four retained their amethyst hue.

Evidently, a Blue participant lighting up the sixth circle in every assessment was the expectation: not the exception: so the organizers didn't feel the need to announce such a result to the world.

“The third category is called ‘mana’,” the attendant said. “It might sound a bit vague, but that’s because you’ll be tested in multiple overlapping areas at the same time. It’s actually similar to the assessment you have just completed, the difference being that you are only allowed to use your mana and not your domain.”

The woman gave Percy and his host more information as they travelled to the location of the next test. Apparently, the reason for the generic title was because the assessment would simultaneously evaluate their mana capacity, regeneration, and control.

They would still have to lift weights, destroy moving targets and solve simple puzzles from afar, though they would also have to carefully manage their mana expenditure throughout the test, since it wasn’t possible to replenish it nearly as quickly as one’s willpower.

In other words, having a higher capacity would give someone a head-start in the test, but so would having faster mana regeneration or being able to complete the required tasks more efficiently.

“Is it fair to assume that all the founding factions have a major advantage during this test due to their ancestral Decrees?” Kassorith asked upon listening to her explanation.

“Indeed,” she confirmed. “This is slightly less true for the Inimits than the other three, but even the least talented participants from the founding factions are basically guaranteed to light the sixth circle up, regardless of their skillset. Those who also have the Void Decree almost always light the seventh one up too. In fact, this is the test where the eighth circle is most commonly lit up, though it’s difficult to call somebody a paragon if they only excel in a single category,” she added with a chuckle.

Percy sighed, fully aware that his host was currently at the opposite end of the spectrum. While they had all sorts of ways to bolster their performance in other categories, raw mana efficiency was the one area where Kassorith would be most disadvantaged.

At best, stamping a few enchantments onto their constructs would make them more effective at a lower cost, but it wouldn’t be enough to lift the Thess’kalan’s magic up by a full grade, let alone two. Had they been allowed their second core or boosting art, they would have done as well as anyone else, but they sadly had to make do without either of those things.

The actual test proceeded pretty much according to Percy’s expectations.

It was the shortest one so far: for them at least: since Kassorith ran out of mana for the required tasks fairly quickly. They had barely made it over halfway to the sixth circle, yet they couldn't keep up with the steep difficulty curve.

Adding insult to injury, their ticket shifted again in response to their failure. The third corner of the pentagon dimmed and lost part of its amethyst hue, taking on a dark blue shade that broadcasted their shortcomings to anybody who so much as glanced at their tunic.

Percy was glad that they had undertaken the durability test first, otherwise he would have been too embarrassed to be seen walking around with nothing but the blue stain on the badge.

Fortunately, the fourth assessment went significantly better.

This one was held in an open stadium and was meant to evaluate one's agility. Naturally, flying was not only allowed but practically required. Kassorith was chased by numerous enchanted orbs that he wasn't allowed to attack or even touch, and he was graded based on how long he managed to evade them for.

The magical spheres moved slowly at the beginning, though they grew exponentially faster over the course of the assessment, and an additional orb was added to the flock about once per minute.

Due to possessing a domain roughly on par with a Violet's, Percy and Kassorith could have flown with just their willpower. However, they'd opted to use one of Kassorith's flying greatswords, since utilizing both mana and willpower allowed them to move faster. They'd even enchanted the construct with sharpness and weight reduction runes to maximize its speed.

Once again, they managed to light the sixth circle up rather effortlessly.

Leaving their domain and enchantments aside, they had another major advantage in the form of their enhanced senses. The Sage's Pond allowed them to keep track of the pursuing orbs at all times, and even predict their movements.

Consequently, they avoided getting hit way longer than their speed alone should have allowed, though they weren't able to dodge the devices forever. Even if they knew where the orbs were coming from,

there was only so much that they could do while surrounded from every direction and not allowed to fight back in any way.

‘We were so darn close.’ Micky clicked his tongue in annoyance as soon as they were back on solid ground.

They had been less than half a minute away from completing the seventh circle, though they’d ultimately fallen short.

‘It’s indeed a pity, but it isn’t all gloom and doom. Don’t forget that we’ve just qualified for the next round, and that comes with a free reward from the prize pool. Maybe we can find a nice Decree to make up for our weaknesses,’ Kassorith consoled in a fashion somewhat atypical of his usual, snarky demeanour. Clearly, the Thess’kalan understood that they had to leave their differences aside and cooperate properly in order to reach their goal.

Percy smiled wryly at his host’s words. The scaled man wasn’t wrong, but what he had left unsaid was that their opponents would also get to pick a Decree of their own. The strongest among them had probably collected many of them from previous tournaments, and those were exactly the people that they would have to overcome to get their hands on their third core.