Wanderer 631

Chapter 631: Offense

The trio left the conversation there.

Percy knew that he couldn't count solely on the rewards to get him through the tournament, so he still hoped that he and his companions would light up the seventh circle during the final assessment with their own strength.

The fifth category was offense, according to the attendant.

The test appeared simple at first, taking place in one of the smaller rooms, much like those from the durability assessment. Ten enchanted pillars surrounded Kassorith in a wide circle, about fifty metres across.

A random number of pillars between one and ten would supposedly flash at any given time, and Kassorith would have about a minute to strike each with enough force to "destroy" it.

Hearing more about the rules, Percy was honestly quite impressed with the amount of thought the organizers had put behind the test, to make sure that it was as fair as possible for all types of mages.

Spells of every affinity would work, including spectral or mental attacks: or even bursts of healing: so that those with rare affinities not suited for physical destruction wouldn't be uniquely disadvantaged. Apparently, some of the previous assessments would have also looked somewhat differently for a life or mind mage than they had for Kassorith.

Participants were allowed to charge their attacks, though the amount of damage required to destroy the targets increased linearly, depending on how long they remained active.

It was also up to the participant whether to attack multiple pillars at the same time or eliminate them one by one. The second approach was obviously easier to pull off, but it was much slower, so later attacks would require more power to destroy the pillars.

In other words, the test was just as accessible to a person who specialized in firing a barrage of smaller attacks as it was to one who preferred to pour all their mana into a single, powerful blast.

Percy and his companions could have gone either way, since their enchantments were quite versatile. After a few moments of deliberation, they decided to set up five three-layered heating formations, just like the ones that they had experimented extensively with during their stay in Lanthaniel's internal world.

They felt that it was a good compromise, as it would give them the option of fuelling as many of the enchantments as necessary to demolish the targets. If less than six pillars lit up, they would only have to charge up a single wave of attacks. If more targets happened to activate, Percy and his companions would have to fire twice.

Destroying the pillars at the start of the assessment should be easy enough with just Percy's willpower, giving the trio plenty of time to accumulate mana and prepare the actual formations for later: just like they had done during the durability test.

The only challenge was accurately guessing how much mana to pour into each attack.

If they used too little, they would fail to destroy the targets, giving the devices a chance to not only regenerate the damage, but even grow more durable. Suffice to say, this would be bad for Kassorith's reserves. Conversely, pouring too much mana into the enchantments would empty their core faster than necessary.

Happy with their strategy, they began the assessment.

Before long, crimson beams rained upon the glowing pillars one after the other, forcefully deactivating them. The air inside the small room grew unbearably hot in no time, to the point that a regular Blue would have had trouble breathing.

Kassorith's lightning affinity didn't grant him much resistance to heat, and he didn't have access to his lava core either, so he wouldn't have fared well if not for his Greater Thess'kalan Physique. Even with it, each breath scorched his lungs, making the test somewhat unpleasant.

Still, nobody complained, doing their best to last as long as possible.

Percy and his companions made several mistakes during the earlier waves. Thankfully, it didn't cost them much mana, because the pillars had still been relatively easy to destroy. By the time the difficulty picked up, they had gotten a good enough grasp on the assessment to manage their resources more efficiently.

Lighting the sixth circle up proved laughably easy.

Knowing that they had passed four out of five tests: one more than what was necessary: filled them with confidence, though they didn't give up until they were out of mana.

The seventh circle was almost fully active when their core was squeezed dry. If they could have launched one more barrage, Percy was certain that it would have been enough, but it wasn't meant to be.

This wasn't ideal, since they had only managed to light the seventh circle up in one of the assessments. However, Percy wasn't too discouraged, finding solace in the knowledge that they had come extremely close twice more.

These tests were quite comprehensive, but they still hadn't evaluated all of their abilities. Percy had barely taken advantage of his enhanced senses during the agility test, and none of the assessments had even touched upon his close combat skills or Kassorith's ability to recover from the verge of death through his bloodline.

Would any of those things help them to overcome the monstrous opponents that they would undoubtedly face in the next round?

It was hard to tell. The other participants were bound to possess several trump cards of their own. Even so, Percy was determined to do whatever it took to get his hands on the Void Decree. He knew that he might never get another chance to earn it, and he wasn't one to let such opportunities slip through his fingers.

In any case, the upcoming fights were a problem for later.

As they exited the room to meet up with the attendant, Percy couldn't help but think about the system the Void Hand used to evaluate their disciples, wondering how he would fit in it.

On paper, he was a Yellow capable of fighting against Violets, making him a Sixth Circle mage like Kassorith. This was more than enough to cause quite a stir in the Void Hand, especially since Percy felt that his strength was relatively balanced, potentially allowing him to do well in most categories.

While fighting at full strength, the combination of his Cloak, domain and body should be enough to resist a Violet's attacks. His enchanted weapons should also be powerful enough to return the favour with something equally deadly, and he was more than fast enough to keep up with such an opponent. Finally, he also had plenty of power and control over his domain, so he was confident that he could light up the sixth circle in four out of five assessments.

He would probably only fall short in the mana category. Despite having two cores and the Dance, he would barely qualify as a Fifth Circle mage.

Of course, Percy was technically cheating. He could only fight against a weak Violet, and only thanks to the domain that he shared with Micky, essentially borrowing strength from his friend who was a Green. Without that, Percy was only as good as a powerful Blue in most categories.

On the flipside, the Huehuan had also proven himself on par with a Sixth Circle mage, and he might even be able to reach that level without Percy's help in some categories. The caveat was, once again, that Micky was a Green, so he was only punching up by two grades, not three.

Finally, by joining forces through their Extreme spell, they could likely defeat someone in the upper end of the Violet grade. Even so, Percy didn't think that they would be able to light the seventh circle up in any category, and the Lone Wanderer was technically also a Green due to possessing at least one such core.

In other words, no matter how Percy looked at it, it was debatable whether he and Micky could honestly claim themselves capable of fighting three grades above their own. They were certainly close, but not quite there.

Perhaps, if all four of their cores had been at Green, the Symphony would have allowed them to just barely touch the level of a Seventh Circle mage, but it was difficult to be sure. Besides, by the time they

completed their artificial advancements, Micky's first core would also reach Blue, so the question would likely remain unanswered for the foreseeable future.

Was this a huge problem?

Not really. This was ultimately just an external classification system that didn't affect anything. However, it did remind Percy that he still had plenty of room for improvement before he could be considered a true paragon: his lacking grade aside.

'Well… it's not like jumping up by three grades is some kind of hard limit either,' he thought. 'It's just that nobody has ever done better than that, probably, but there's no reason why I can't aim higher.'

A paragon could theoretically hold their own against the weakest gods, but Rhaziel was the strongest deity on Felmara. Percy had no idea what that meant exactly, but he doubted that becoming an Eleventh Circle mage would be enough to free his friend's enslaved people.

Then, there was also the matter of Robari and Marnok. The Cardinal Devil had driven multiple gods mad, so Percy would need to grow stronger than them if he wished to help the sailor.

He sighed, knowing that he couldn't afford to grow complacent just because his track record was somewhat impressive. His enemies were extremely powerful, and he wasn't going to bring them down simply by flaunting his potential. He needed power, and he needed it fast.

'Either way, it's not a bad idea to popularize this system on Remior,' he thought, deciding to tell Phoebe about it the next chance he got.

In the past, their world hadn't produced many people capable of jumping grades, but this was about to change: especially once the Dance spread. While Percy had done his best to keep his boosting art under wraps, he was under no illusion that things would stay that way forever, nor did he intend them to.

Upon exiting the room, Percy was broken out of his thoughts after spotting a group of conversing Denytes who had likely also finished their assessments. He recognized most of them from the space station, though there were a couple of new faces among them.

That alone wouldn't have been a big deal. It probably meant that they had been escorted to Marador Prime separately, by their mentors or something. However, Percy couldn't help but gasp as soon as his senses brushed over a certain person's badge.

Three of its five corners shone in a white colour, indicating that the owner of the pinned ticket had managed to light the seventh circle up in most of their assessments.

That might not be all that impressive for someone with two Blue cores: a couple of other Denytes like that had lit up just as many corners. The problem was, this person didn't have a second core yet. Percy only spotted a single patch of magical hair growing on their scalp.

In other words, they had brutally outperformed Kassorith without even having the Void Decree!

Chapter 632: Anticipation

Percy's curiosity got the better of him, so he pretended to move away from the group of chatting Denytes while secretly scanning them with his Sage's Pond. The aliens noticed him too, though they didn't seem nearly as interested in him as he was in them, exuding an air of haughtiness as they continued their conversation.

Perhaps it was somewhat unusual for a member of a lesser faction to perform as well as Kassorith had, but anyone paying attention would have expected him to do a little better than the average Thess'kalan.

They'd all seen him escorted to the space station by a god from a different race, and it was obvious that this wouldn't have happened if Percy's host hadn't been at least somewhat talented. Still, after glancing at the three unlit corners on Kassorith's pin and the one that had dimmed after the mana assessment, the Denytes clearly didn't think that he posed much of a threat to them.

Regardless, Percy didn't care about their opinion. Slithering away as casually as he could, he carefully studied the Denytes while they were still within his range. His host and Micky didn't stop him either, probably being equally interested in their prospective rivals.

It wasn't all that surprising that those with a pair of Blue cores had managed to light up the seventh circle in so many assessments. For their second core to have caught up to their first, they must have earned the Void Decree over a decade ago at a minimum, meaning that they had been dominating the

top brackets of the tournament for years. That would suggest that they'd already earned most of the powerful Decrees that were available in the prize pool, stacking the odds heavily in their favour.

'Well, unless they're Green-borns I suppose, but that doesn't seem to be the case,' Percy concluded.

His ability to tell a person's age from the fluctuations of their soul had always been weaker while inhabiting a body than while navigating the space between worlds, but it had improved greatly with experience and his recent sensory upgrades. Percy was pretty sure that these people were over a century old, except for the one that had piqued his interest.

Of course, that person wasn't a child either, but there was no doubt that they were a newcomer to the competition. Percy figured that she was female, as her build was lither and more feminine than even the other Denytes: who didn't exactly look like the manliest bunch themselves. To her credit, the woman's gaze didn't seem as arrogant or disdainful as that of her people, though it was just as cold and impassive.

For her to perform so well in the assessments with a single core and most Decrees probably missing, she had to be a prodigy even by the Void Hand's standards. Based on the reverent looks her compatriots gave her despite being her seniors by several decades, Percy grew surer of his guess.

'Interesting… I wonder what makes her so strong…' Percy thought, examining her more closely.

She had a rare affinity: that much was obvious. Initially, he'd mistakenly thought that she was bald, but a careful inspection had revealed that her hair was simply transparent: something that Percy had learned to associate with the time and gravity affinities.

These weren't mana types that he encountered often, though he'd still run into both a bunch of times over the years, so he could tell that something about the way her hair looked was off. Light appeared to slow down as it passed through the magical mane, the scene it revealed appearing to lag a couple of seconds behind what was actually happening.

'A time affinity with a blessing?' Kassorith wondered. 'Add an ancestral Decree and a half decent bloodline into the mix, and I can definitely see how she managed to perform so well.'

Percy nodded in agreement, suddenly feeling a surge of anticipation inside his borrowed chest. He wished to meet this person on the arena.

It might not be great for his odds in the competition, but he couldn't help his curiosity. He'd fought many difficult battles during his life, yet he couldn't recall ever coming across somebody with as much potential as him, except maybe for Gabe. Most of his opponents had only managed to push him to his limits due to having a massive advantage in age, experience, birth grade, or usually all three.

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The female Denyte was different.

Right now, she was still weaker than Percy's main body: or well… not really, but she wasn't jumping as many grades as him: but what if she were to obtain the Void Decree and a bunch of others from the prize pool?

If she happened to awaken another rare affinity and her people managed to get her a Ring of Sacrilege for it, she might even become a paragon herself: a leading figure in the alliance that was no less talented than Percy.

Alas, sparring against her with a borrowed body wasn't going to scratch his itch. Perhaps they would have a chance to duke it out for real one day.

'Have you guys noticed that all the two-cored people that we've seen so far have a rare mana type in their abdomen?' Micky suddenly asked, breaching a new topic.

'Huh?' Percy was taken aback. As a matter of fact, he hadn't noticed anything of the sort. Thinking back to all the people with the Void Decree that he had encountered over the past couple of days, he tried to recall their affinities.

He hadn't paid attention to all of them, partly because only the Denytes openly broadcasted their mana types on their heads like this, and partly because Percy hadn't realized that there was something fishy going on. Still, the more he thought about it, the more he agreed that his friend might be onto something.

‘You don’t think…?!’ he asked back with a gasp.

It was too much of a coincidence for this to be random, but wasn’t the Void Decree supposed to be a pale imitation of the Moirais’ Decree that was riddled with flaws? Did these people actually have a way of choosing what affinity they awakened?!

If that were true, the Void Decree would be a hundred times more valuable than Percy had initially thought.

‘It sounds difficult to believe, but I don’t know how else to explain it,’ Kassorith said, clearly on the same page.

‘Maybe it’s not exactly like that. It’s possible it only grants a pure affinity and they use rare affinity-granting treasures to upgrade it,’ Micky suggested, offering a viable alternative while obviously trying very hard to avoid any mention of Huehue in the Thess’kalan’s presence.

‘Could be, but that’s more or less the same thing when it comes to a peak faction like the Void Hand,’ Percy pointed out.

Rare treasures were almost impossible to get for anyone else, but an alliance of this size could definitely afford to give a few to their top talents. Wouldn’t that make this more of a boon than a drawback of the Decree?

It just didn’t make sense.

Percy didn’t think that the rumours about the shortcomings of the Void Decree were false. Metatron had made it very clear how difficult it was to cast such a powerful collaborative Decree. Unless the Void Hand had somehow fixed it in the past decade or so without anybody learning about it, there had to be some other severe problem that they weren’t aware of.

‘Both things could be true at once, I guess,’ Micky responded with a mental shrug. ‘It’s possible that the Void Decree as a whole is inferior to the Moirais’ while still having an advantage over it. In any case, there’s only one way to know for sure.’

Percy nodded, his borrowed mouth drying as a spark of greed flared up in his host's eyes. All thoughts of testing himself against the female Denyte instantly sank to the bottom of his list of priorities, his mind now occupied solely by the alluring promise of a third mana core.

Before anybody had a chance to say anything else, they were interrupted by the attendant.

"There you are!" the female Maradorian said as she reached them, sounding slightly out of breath. "Congratulations on passing the first round of the tournament!" she added, her face beaming.

"Ugh… thanks?" Percy replied in his host's stead while awkwardly scratching the back of his head.

He found it difficult to get too excited about his performance after falling short of his goals for the first round. Judging from the sincerity on the woman's expression, however, she clearly thought differently.

Perhaps, she hadn't even imagined him keeping up with those from the founding factions. Percy keenly remembered his host telling him that his people never made it past the preliminaries in the void tournament, so even getting this far had to be quite the achievement for a Thess'kalan.

"What's wrong? You don't look very happy," the attendant said with a frown. "You should be very proud of yourself after lighting up the seventh circle in any of the tests."

"Yeah… I suppose that you're right," Percy conceded, forcing the corners of Kassorith's lips to curl up slightly.

"I know of a great way to cheer you up," the Maradorian insisted with a chuckle. "Are you looking forward to claiming your first reward from the prize pool?"

Hearing her question, Percy's awkward smile gave way to a far more genuine one. The orange-skinned woman sure knew how to get a participant's blood boiling.

"Now you're speaking my language. Please lead the way."

Chapter 633: Browsing through Decrees (1)

Percy expected the attendant to lead his host to some kind of treasury like the ones on Thess'kala, but she didn't do that. The female Maradorian only walked a couple of blocks across the city before stopping outside a seemingly random building.

"See that enchanted screen over there?" she asked, pointing at a square indentation on the metallic wall. "You'll find lots of terminals like that scattered throughout Maradion. Just tap your badge against them to log in. You can use them to easily book accommodation, order food, find any information you need about the tournament or the city, or browse through the reward pool."

Percy couldn't help but frown. This sounded conveniently similar to the Vault's system, making him wonder whether one had inspired the other. Then again, this was an extremely practical way of accessing goods and services. It might just be the case that any sufficiently advanced civilization would eventually stumble upon technology like this once their runes reached a high enough level.

"Is there no centralized treasury for the tournament?" he asked, more out of curiosity rather than because it made a difference.

The woman shook her head. "Most of our rewards are nothing like what you have earned in your regional competition. We can't neatly store everything in a single warehouse. Decrees work in all sorts of strange ways, since titans can't always control every aspect of the spell."

Percy nodded, his experience with divine magic corroborating the Maradorian's words. Some Decrees: like Obatala's: were granted in the form of lightning that was literally sent down from the heavens, and that was just one rather extreme example. Others required a person to meditate atop a special platform, eat fruit from a magical tree, or memorize a long poem engraved on a giant stele.

Naturally, collecting all the resources and structures required by every Decree in the prize pool and storing them in a single location wasn't practical. It made more sense for the participants to figure out what they wanted and request the necessary tools delivered directly to them or ask to be escorted to the right facility.

Before leaving Kassorith to browse the rewards by himself, the attendant volunteered a few additional titbits of information about the competition.

According to her, the second round would commence five days later, after the participants got sorted into groups. Until then, they were allowed to freely roam this part of the capital, where they would have access to restaurants, shops and inns meant solely for them.

Percy had been wondering why they hadn't encountered any civilians yet, and the attendant had helpfully given him the answer. Apparently, the part of the capital where the extraterrestrial guests stayed was segregated from the residential areas to prevent unnecessary conflict.

Since the Void Hand's member-factions weren't always on good terms with one another, it wasn't unheard of for a resentful Violet or White from one of the weaker worlds to go on a rampage after suffering a bitter loss in the tournament.

Granted, most participants weren't dumb enough to ruin their life like that, and the Maradorian authorities were more than powerful enough to swiftly diffuse any such situation. Even so, a lone madman could still hurt a lot of innocent Reds and Yellows before being stopped.

Consequently, the only civilians that Percy would lay eyes upon would be those who chose to spectate his host's future matches.

That said, the attendant didn't mention anything about Kassorith having to avoid certain parts of the capital, so Percy assumed that the Maradorians had erected powerful barriers to prevent them from so much as stepping where they weren't welcome.

With that out of the way, he was eager to finally get his hands on his first new Decree in over a decade, though there was one last thing that he had to do before he and his companions lost themselves inside the terminal.

Briefly taking control of his host's body, he scanned his surroundings for the tallest, most memorable structure. Activating Ludwick's Compass, he lit up an illusory pyre around it. He didn't know what the building was for, but it didn't really matter. Percy just wanted a way to return to the planet in the future.

Not that he thought it would be easy to join the void tournament a second time. Even possessing a random Maradorian would be quite a challenge, unless he figured out how to completely withhold the Moirais' Decree from his hosts.

The recipe that he had purchased from Metatron would help him suppress any unwanted mana cores, but that didn't mean much when dealing with a peak faction who likely possessed a Status-like Decree and were extremely hostile toward the Moirai.

Still, Percy would have to be a fool not to mark the capital of one of the most powerful greater springs in the universe. Even if he couldn't access the rewards of the competition or the Maradorians' ancestral Decree, there was a lot that he could potentially gain merely by possessing a random critter.

Oblivious to Percy's thoughts, Kassorith was the first in the group to run out of patience. Slithering up to the terminal, he quickly pressed the amethyst badge against its smooth surface, causing the runes to flash and merge into a large screen.

Percy and Micky didn't stop him. Knowing that their host was not only more familiar with the Void Hand but had also lived in the Vault of Magic a lot longer, they silently waited for him to figure out how the machine worked.

Its interface was somewhat different from those in the artificial world, but still quite intuitive, and the underlying principles were identical to the Vault's, so it didn't take the Thess'kalan long to find the information they needed.

To no one's surprise, the alliance had produced a lot of Decrees over the years.

Even the weakest member-factions had birthed anywhere from several dozen to a couple hundred titans: orders of magnitude more than Remior: with the founding factions approaching a thousand each. The Void Hand as a whole had produced several thousand Decrees over its long history, not including any that their members had chosen to keep secret from one another.

Percy and his companions weren't in a rush to pick one, since they still had several days before their first match. Instead, they took their sweet time browsing carefully through not only their options, but also any auxiliary information that they could find about Decrees in general, wishing to broaden their horizons.

Metatron had once explained that collaborative Decrees were more difficult to cast than those created by a single titan, thus making them more powerful and valuable. However, that designation only

concerned how the Decree in question had been produced: not what it did. As it turned out, Decrees were also categorised by their function.

Infrastructure-type Decrees were the most common in the universe, since it was much easier to enchant a stationary patch of dirt, a hill, forest, or lake, than it was to safely and permanently empower a person: or worse, a group of people.

It was also much easier to do that with common and composite affinities, which were obviously more abundant. Furthermore, negative side-effects were easier to tolerate in such Decrees, so long as they remained useable.

After all, there weren't many factions willing to accept their people being permanently disfigured like the Ollorians, but nobody would care if a forest enchanted to produce valuable herbs faster ended up being uncomfortably hot.

Infrastructure-type Decrees were further broken down into sub-types, such as the ones that most greater springs used to increase the density of ambient mana on their worlds, those that created specialized training zones like the Thirsty Valley, or Decrees that made transportation and communication easier.

Only one of Remior's three titans had produced an infrastructure-type Decree, but Percy quickly realized that his home was too small to draw any useful conclusions from.

Factions in control of multiple planets and moons had a much greater need for such Decrees, as well as an abundance of suitable locations to place them at, so they were far more common among greater springs. According to the documents that Percy and his companions were reading, over ninety percent of the Void Hand's Decrees fell into this category.

Unfortunately, this meant that several thousands of them were practically useless to Percy. They weren't even available in the tournament, nor did he have any way of bringing them back to Remior.

Of the several hundred Decrees that affected people, most couldn't be shared with the tournament's participants: at least not in a convenient manner: and many others were considered too precious to share.

Still, the prize pool listed over a hundred Decrees that Percy could potentially choose from.

The second most common type was one that Percy had encountered before but hadn't known the name for: active-type Decrees. These Decrees basically contained a single, powerful ability that could be unleashed at will, without consuming a single mote of mana or willpower. The titan had already taken care of the cost by making the ability fully self-contained.

Upon reading this, Percy was informed by his host that Metatron's Decree actually belonged in this category, which admittedly made sense.

As common and powerful as active-type Decrees were, they apparently suffered from a severe restriction that Percy hadn't been aware of. A mortal could only ever possess a maximum of three such Decrees at any given time.

According to Kassorith: who had actually learned this directly from Metatron: this had to do with the way these Decrees functioned. While they didn't consume any of their owner's resources, their effect didn't manifest out of nowhere. Activating them imposed a new set of temporary rules in the local space, essentially modifying reality around the user on a small scale.

Carrying too many at once caused them to interfere with one another in catastrophic ways.

Luckily, Percy and Kassorith wouldn't have to worry about accidentally killing themselves during the tournament. The Void Hand had implemented all sorts of failsafes into their Decrees to prevent a mortal from absorbing too many.

The problem was that Percy and his host would hit that wall sooner than they were supposed to if they attempted to claim three active-type Decrees from the tournament, which could expose their ties to the Vault. In fact, this was the only reason the titan had bothered to warn the Thess'kalan about this issue.

'Well… shit,' Percy spat with a grimace. 'I can't believe that he forced it into one of my limited slots without mentioning this sooner.'

Chapter 634: Browsing through Decrees (2)

All things considered, Percy didn't exactly regret being given Metatron's Decree.

It had already saved both his own skin and that of his friends plenty of times. That was without even mentioning that it was still his only way of accessing the treasure trove of magical knowledge that was the Vault.

However, Metatron should have at least mentioned this limitation sooner. What if Percy had gotten himself killed trying to acquire too many active-type Decrees? Or missed out on a really good one because he'd already filled all of his slots up?

The good news was that, unlike other limited abilities such as bloodlines, blessings, or spectral traits, active-type Decrees could be removed and replaced at will. Well… sort of. Percy already knew that the pentapus could revoke his Decree, though not every titan was able to incorporate that feature into their spell. If they didn't, getting rid of the Decree would still be possible, but it would usually require help from an even wiser and more experienced titan.

There were titans who went a step further, including an automatic self-removal function in the Decree that would allow even a clueless mortal to purge it with a thought.

Percy wasn't planning to get rid of Metatron's Decree anytime soon, but it was nice to know that he wouldn't be stuck with it forever. Would he even need to visit the artificial world after becoming a god? What about after he reached the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage? Would Metatron have anything left to teach him? Would the Vault even exist by then?

Alas, those were questions for a different time.

'That settles it,' Percy told his companions. 'Let's make sure to grab at least one active-type from the tournament at some point.'

They had yet to skim through the list, but the prize pool contained over ninety Decrees of this category, so there was bound to be one that suited them.

Admittedly, their strict requirements would greatly limit their options. Finding one that worked on both Percy and Kassorith, affected their minds or souls rather than their bodies: so that it would be more likely to follow him back to Remior: and could be freely purged without a titan's assistance would be difficult.

Still, if Percy couldn't find a Decree like that out of dozens: offered by a peak faction no less: then he was even less likely to get one elsewhere, so there would be no point in holding onto both of his remaining slots. Even so, he planned to keep at least one open, in case he did stumble upon something useful during his future travels.

'I'm not against it. For all their limitations, they are quite powerful. However, I vote that we leave this for later,' Kassorith replied.

'Agreed,' Micky said, with Percy echoing the sentiment.

Sadly, active-type Decrees weren't allowed in the tournament, because they could potentially produce attacks powerful enough to threaten even demigods. Had the organizers not banned them, the competition would have quickly devolved into a contest of who-can-land-their-Decree-first: at least in the Blue and Violet grades.

This was all the more reason for Percy to stick to just one of these, and to wait a few more rounds. For now, he needed something that was immediately useful.

With his mind made up, he moved onto the next two relatively common categories of Decrees: bloodline- and mental-types.

While titans with the life or mind affinity were less common, they did have a somewhat easier time casting these sorts of Decrees: at least compared to others. Every single Decree was ultimately considered an absolute miracle of magic, but bloodline- and mental-types could be created by following a known framework.

It was a bit like a chef preparing a meal by sticking to the recipe. Those who created mental- or bloodline-type Decrees could: and did: often tweak them slightly, giving them their own spin, but they didn't have to reinvent the wheel.

The problem with such Decrees was that they typically couldn't be stacked with others in the same category freely.

Bloodline-type Decrees were more flexible, but that was offset by the fact that there was less variance between them. One might grant a person a slightly higher chance of passing down their bloodline to their descendants, while another could potentially boost their odds of developing a mutated strain.

Combining them might make the Decree a little stronger than the sum of its parts, but the benefits were usually marginal, and sometimes unpredictable or downright detrimental.

Since bloodline-type Decrees were among the most likely to affect large groups of people in random ways for generations, it generally wasn't worth to take the risk of merging them, unless the components both possessed some really unique and valuable property.

The documents made it clear that this wasn't the case for the Decrees the alliance had access to, since none of the member-factions had ever attempted to acquire a second one.

Percy and Kassorith both had their own bloodlines, and they had even been granted by different Decrees, so they didn't want to experiment with this either. Besides, bloodline-type Decrees mostly affected one's descendants, so they were unlikely to help them in the tournament. Even if they could, such Decrees targeted a person's flesh, meaning that Percy wouldn't be able to keep them.

Skipping the category entirely, they moved on to the next.

Mental-type Decrees were surprisingly even more rigid. They were considered impossible to combine without frying one's brain. Recalling the ominous error messages and splitting headache that he had suffered on Atlantis, Percy was inclined to agree.

At the same time, he understood that this rule no longer applied to him.

He had long hypothesized that Phoebe's Decree was unique in how adaptable it was, though it appeared that he had still severely underestimated just how much of a genius his favourite: and least favourite: titaness was.

Her Decree was the only one of its kind that Percy had seen which hadn't come bundled with some secondary boon: at least for the time being: yet its ability to assimilate other mental-type Decrees without limit was apparently unprecedented.

Judging by the confused message that Percy had received the first time he had tried to upgrade his Status, this clearly hadn't been the goddess's intention. Regardless, Remior had evidently produced a second ability valuable enough to throw the whole universe into turmoil: the other being Percy's bloodline of course.

'Well, isn't that great…' Percy thought, clicking his borrowed tongue. 'Another thing that I need to keep to myself until Remior is strong enough to defend itself.'

Sadly, it might already be a little too late for that. While Percy was generally careful not to let his hosts read his Status, some had inevitably learned about Phoebe's Decree. Thankfully, Enki and Duwa were unlikely to bring him much trouble: they were good, sensible kids from weaker factions that had no idea where Remior was.

However, Percy didn't trust Kassorith or Metatron farther than he could throw them. Hopefully, they had yet to piece together the fact that his current Status was the result of several mental-type Decrees merging, but the Thess'kalan would inevitably put two and two together if they tried to claim one from the tournament.

'Let's just tell him,' Micky said. 'We're way past worrying about what Metatron knows. At least this isn't something that he can get his tentacles on without our help.'

Percy replied with a mental nod. Phoebe's Decree was way too valuable not to take advantage of, and it would be a shame if they missed the chance to assimilate one of the Void Hand's Decrees. The sooner they brought the Thess'kalan up to speed, the sooner they'd be able to plan out their rewards.

Kassorith listened to their explanation wide-eyed, his treacherous little brain probably trying to come up with ways to use the information to his benefit. Fortunately, the scaled bastard had nothing to gain by spilling the beans to his former faction.

Once that was settled, they resumed browsing through the list. The Void Hand had produced dozens of mental-type Decrees. About a third of its greater springs possessed one. Another third: including Thess'kala: owned a bloodline-type Decree, while the remaining factions had both.

It was basically unheard of for a greater spring to possess neither, and even lesser springs like Remior, Gallimus, or Atlantis occasionally managed to produce one, although that wasn't too common.

Of course, not every member-faction of the alliance had a bloodline- or mental-type Decree that they were both willing and able to pass to outsiders, so only a handful of each category was included in the prize pool.

Having the unique ability to absorb as many as he wanted, Percy was naturally tempted to ignore all the other rewards and invest everything into mental-type Decrees, so as to fully capitalize on his advantage. Leaving aside how useful they were individually, assimilating them tended to combine and enhance their effects in all sorts of interesting ways.

Hell, maybe he should stop worrying about his affinities or mutations entirely and just make it his life's mission to upgrade his Status as much as possible. For all he knew, it might eventually become so powerful that he would never need another ability.

'Well… I'll probably run into some other wall eventually, but that could be several Decrees down the line. It might be best to skip one if it sucks, just in case it creates issues later, but it's still worth grabbing any that catch my eye for now,' he thought.

Unfortunately, there were a few problems with that idea.

While Phoebe's Decree had grown better at absorbing others with each upgrade, Percy's clones still had to bring the new Decree back to his main body to complete the process. He had no intention of trying to assimilate more than one at the same time. Kassorith's existence would prevent him from even attempting that.

Secondly, the new Decree wasn't going to grant him any benefits before the process was complete, meaning that it wouldn't help in the tournament. If he got unlucky, it might even cripple the other functions of his Status, temporarily disabling his enhanced senses or locked domain.

Finally, if the new Decree was anything like Phoebe's, it might grant the titan who had cast it the ability to spy on Percy's Status: something that would be quite problematic, for obvious reasons.

No matter how he looked at it, it was best to delay claiming a mental Decree for as long as possible, prioritizing other rewards.

‘Okay… we might not win the tournament, but we have to aim for the top eight at least,’ he told his companions. ‘I think we should plan out our rewards with the assumption that we’ll only earn four. If we make it further than that, we can treat it as a bonus, and if we get eliminated earlier, we’re fucked anyway.’

Next, he proceeded to outline his reasoning.

They should reserve the fourth reward for the mental-type Decree to minimize the odds of having their senses impaired or leaking information to the local deities. They should also wait until the third reward for the active-type Decree. It wouldn’t be detrimental in the same way, but it would still be useless during the competition.

This meant that they only had the first two rewards to strengthen themselves.

‘Don’t forget about the first-generation leaves,’ Micky reminded him.

Percy sighed. His friend had raised a good point. They had, in fact, caught a glimpse of the leaves while browsing earlier. Thankfully, they were offered in bundles of five this time, which was quite a bargain.

He wasn’t as surprised by the alliance’s “generosity”, fully aware that this was a relatively small investment for them. Those from the weaker factions rarely passed the preliminaries, and the few who did were definitely talented enough to deserve an extended lifespan.

As for those from the founding factions… Anyone participating in not just the void tournament, but even the regional events had probably consumed a leaf a long time ago. Including the leaves in the prize pool seemed more like an afterthought, since very few participants bothered to claim them.

That said, Percy was seriously considering it.

He might have been hesitant to waste a reward on a single leaf, but a bundle of five was a different story. He could only increase his current lifespan by fifty percent, because he'd already consumed a second-generation leaf, but Micky could still triple his.

If their artificial advancements failed, then they would both need every second they could get to reach the Clear grade. Even if they succeeded, having more time to forge an internal world wouldn't hurt. Nephthys, Nesha, and most of Percy's other friends were at least Orange-borns, so he wasn't as concerned about them, but having a few spare leaves only sweetened the deal further.

He could even give one to Kassorith to quell his complaints.

'Fine. I guess we'll have to spend our second reward on that,' Percy conceded.

It wasn't ideal, because it would only leave them a single shot at boosting their strength. The fact that the final category of Decrees was considered the most valuable by far only exacerbated the bitter taste in Percy's borrowed mouth.

It was called the free-type, and it included things like the Moirais' and Void Decrees, as well as the four ancestral Decrees of the founding factions. It was named as such because a person could theoretically absorb as many such Decrees as they could get their hands on.

The Void Hand only possessed about twenty free-type Decrees in total, including the four that Percy had already encountered, though only nine were available through the tournament.

'Well, it doesn't matter. I doubt we'll find more than a handful that meet all of our requirements anyway,' he consoled himself.

Chapter 635: Browsing through Decrees (3)

Not every free-type Decree was as absurdly powerful as those that Percy had learned about before, yet they were still considered infinitely more valuable than any other category.

Even if their effect was subtle, they had the advantage of permanently empowering someone at no cost. Every other category: be they active-, bloodline-, or mental-type Decrees: would consume a limited slot.

Even other abilities like bloodlines, blessings, spectral traits, or mindsets were always weighed against the opportunity cost of obtaining something better.

Meanwhile, free-type Decrees were widely considered to be the holy grail of magic, since their benefits stacked with almost no limits. In theory, if a peak faction like the Moirai or the Void Hand obtained a thousand new free-type Decrees, they might be able to conquer the universe simply by virtue of their mages accumulating countless incremental boosts.

Along with comprehending the illusory concept of alchemy, finding new ways for gods to acquire more rare affinities, or getting more mortals to the Concept realm, amassing lots of free-type Decrees could be considered another "win condition" that could break the stalemate between peak factions.

Sadly for everyone involved, these Decrees were the toughest to cast by far.

Producing new titans took a lot of time, space, and resources. The strongest greater springs already possessed hundreds or even thousands of times as many Decrees as the average lesser spring, but only a tiny fraction fell within this elusive category.

To add insult to injury, the nine that Percy could claim from the tournament were markedly worse than the four ancestral Decrees of the founding factions. Still, that didn't stop him from drooling as he went through the list.

'Jolthoria's Decree: Acquired by reciting the incantation engraved on a giant boulder. The words appear different to each person, depending on their affinity, bloodline, personality, and other unknown characteristics. Accepting the words copies them across one's bones. Reciting them again while casting a spell improves its potency and may impart it with new properties. Note 1: Requires an internal skeleton that accounts for at least four percent of a being's body weight. Note 2: Participants are advised to write the incantation down for future reference, as the Decree does not grant automatic memorization.'

This was already a decent one, as it could potentially strengthen all of Kassorith's spells. Of course, it was obviously weaker than the Ollorians' ancestral Decree, which empowered their magic without requiring an incantation to be memorized or spoken. Then again, that Decree had come with its own share of downsides. Besides, the two could probably be stacked for an even stronger boost.

'I guess we're skipping this one,' Percy thought with a frown.

Despite its drawbacks, he would have loved to claim it, but he understood that it wasn't for him. If it engraved itself onto the user's bones, he was unlikely to carry it back to his main body. Kassorith didn't seem happy to discard an otherwise useable Decree simply because it didn't suit Percy, but he clearly knew better than to try and talk him into a suboptimal decision.

They would still have to carefully read all nine entries later, since their strongest opponents in the tournament were likely to possess all of these Decrees, but Percy skimmed through the list for now, focusing solely on the ones that directly concerned him: of which there appeared to only be three.

'Asathanad's Decree: Branded by praying before Asathanad's statue. Allows the Branded to cooperate with other Branded perfectly, without any specialized training or communication. Note 1: Branding one's soul is extremely painful.'

This one sounded like something that Percy and his host could both acquire, though it was admittedly less exciting than the previous one. It reminded him a little of the bloodline that Femel: the Holy Child that Elaine had killed: had once possessed.

The Green-born's ability allowed members of his House to communicate mentally, much like what Percy could accomplish with his clones and familiars, facilitating efficient cooperation. The Decree was even better, since it directly bypassed the need to practice beforehand.

'This would have been handy before our fusion,' Micky said, sending a wave of irritation through Percy's wisp.

Learning to fight together had taken them years of practice, but all of that effort had been rendered obsolete by the advent of their Extreme spell. Or well… that might not be entirely accurate. Perhaps they would have never managed to create their Ultimate Art if not for that training.

Regardless, Percy was disinclined to select it. He was now capable of turning his familiars into aspects which were practically extensions of his body, mind, and soul, and he rarely worked with other people.

Being able to cooperate seamlessly with Archibald or Elaine might help in the coming war, but they would need to also have the Decree for that. Percy could get around it by possessing and coordinating with them through his clones, though that sounded like too niche of a situation to invest so heavily in.

‘I guess this would be a great Decree for the alliance to have when fighting a large-scale battle against the Moirai or a Cardinal Devil, but it’s not really my cup of tea,’ Percy concluded.

It might not be entirely useless in the tournament, as it could smoothen out the kinks in his and Kassorith’s teamwork, but he didn’t think they were that bad at it as things stood. Spending a reward on this would be wasteful.

The next Decree was more interesting.

‘Emah-Nuub’s Decree: Acquired by donating money to seven homeless children in Karaf-Thanat, the capital city of Remen-Alib. Allows one to freely construct their own mindsets without mind mana. Note 1: The roundtrip to Karaf-Thanat is estimated to take half a Maradorian day, so participants are advised to ensure that they have enough time before their next match. Failure to return in time will result in a loss. Note 2: If finding seven homeless children proves difficult, contact the local authorities. They are responsible for maintaining the conditions for Decree acquisition. Note 3: Setting the mindsets up will not require mind mana, but maintaining and using them still exerts a mental toll, so the user cannot support more mindsets than usual. Note 4: User is still advised to seek guidance from a mindset expert for optimal results.’

Percy wasn’t sure what to think about this.

He wasn’t a fan of a Decree that required an eternal supply of homeless children to obtain, but he understood that there was nothing he could do to change that. Even if he rescued the current batch, the locals would just replace them, so there was no point in ruining his participation in the tournament and sending a group of children to the Vault just to feel better.

When it came to the actual effect of the Decree, however, he was more than willing to consider it. It was listed as a free-type: not a mental-type: so he probably didn’t have to worry about his Status trying to assimilate it, yet it sounded like it would still be planted into his mind, meaning that there was a good chance he would be able to bring it to his main body.

‘Hmmm… I wonder whether seven children will be enough for both of us,’ Kassorith interjected. ‘Having to search for fourteen might be problematic. Especially if they’re monitoring us closely.’

Percy nodded. Claiming this one would be a risk, though they should probably decide if they even wanted it before worrying about the specifics. Going over the description once more, he had to admit that he was interested.

Percy had already learned a few things about mindsets from Phoebe and Nephthys, so he was painfully aware that he'd been underutilizing one of his greatest assets: his mind.

Unlike spectral traits, mindsets didn't require their user to possess a mind affinity. It was possible to commission somebody with the correct mana type to set them up. After that, they would merely extract a mental toll to maintain and use.

Of course, if the owner also happened to possess a mind affinity, they could pay part of that toll with mind mana, allowing them to wield more: and more potent: mindsets.

The two mindsets that Percy already possessed didn't cost much energy to maintain, though they weren't all that powerful either. Shimmering Constellations merely rearranged his and Micky's memories, so it actually cost nothing. Ludwick's Compass only tired him while memorizing the routes to his marks. After that, remembering the stored locations wasn't an issue: unless he tried to mark way more planets than he had.

An example of an expensive mindset would be one that improved Percy's reaction speed or heightened his awareness during a fight. He'd been thinking of setting something like that up for a while, so that he could finally start taking advantage of his unused mental capacity.

The problem was that Phoebe was difficult to contact, Nephthys no longer had access to mind mana, and Percy was hesitant to trust a random Green or Blue who happened to have a mind affinity.

Emah-Nuub's Decree would completely solve that problem. It would allow him to skip the cost of creating mindsets entirely, and he could just ask his familiar to guide him through the process. Even better, he wouldn't need to commission a mind mage whenever he wanted to modify, remove, or replace his mindsets.

'If I had this right after our fusion, I wouldn't have needed Phoebe's help…' Percy realized with a sigh.

The Decree would also help them in the tournament. Percy was still connected to his main body and, by extension, Nephthys, so he could ask the reincarnated goddess for a few tips to give a couple of useable mindsets to his host.

The only question was whether this would be a wise choice in the long run.

'Permanently having a way of setting up my own mindsets will be immensely useful… but it's ultimately just a matter of convenience, isn't it?'

The description had made it abundantly clear that the Decree wouldn't help Percy fuel the mindsets after creating them, meaning that he would still be limited to the same capacity as before. In other words, he wouldn't be any stronger than he would have been by receiving, say, Phoebe's help to create them.

Right now, Percy sadly lacked the means to acquire mindsets by himself, but would that always be the case?

Sure, having to always keep a trustworthy mind mage by his side wouldn't be ideal, and getting a few mindsets for the tournament would be nice. Was either of those things worth committing to a Decree though?

'Maybe,' he thought with a shrug.

If he didn't find anything better, it honestly wouldn't be a bad choice. Even if he did, it might be worth revisiting it in case they ended up with more than four rewards.

After consulting with his companions and agreeing to keep this one under consideration, Percy moved on to the third Decree that he had shortlisted earlier, reading its description more carefully.

The more he studied it, the more the corners of his borrowed lips curled up. Any thought of claiming Emah-Nuub's Decree evaporated like snow under the midday sun as Percy grew increasingly certain that he had found something even better.

Chapter 636: Penitent

‘Penitent’s Decree: Acquired by personally scooping and ingesting a handful of blood from an enchanted fountain on Oll. Allows one to shed small pieces of their soul to infuse into their bloodstream, producing spiritual blood. Note 1: The name is a direct translation of the ancient Ollorian word for “penitent”. Note 2: The roundtrip to Oll is estimated to take half a Maradorian day, so participants are advised to ensure that they have enough time before their next match. Failure to return in time will result in a loss. Note 3: Shedding a piece of one’s soul is extremely painful and may require several days to heal naturally. Users without the soul affinity may find this ability impractical. Note 4: Several applications of spiritual blood have been discovered over countless years, and new ones are found every few millennia. Please refer to the attached documents for specifics.’

This… was one of the longest descriptions on the list, giving Percy a lot to unpack, starting from the Decree’s very name.

It was pretty clear that “penitent” wasn’t the titan’s actual name, but rather an adjective that had been used to describe them, translated from that deity’s original tongue to whatever language the Void Hand used nowadays.

Percy didn’t think that this was another collaborative Decree, so it probably meant that it wasn’t the first that this particular titan had cast. Either that, or the god was a bit of an eccentric who had no interest in slapping their name on their masterpiece like every other titan in the universe tended to do.

‘And he’s an Ollorian,’ Micky pointed out. ‘Aren’t they one of the founding factions? The disfigured people?’

Percy nodded. ‘Penitent…’ he thought, turning his attention to his host. ‘What do you think? Could it be the same titan who cast their ancestral Decree? Maybe they adopted this monicker out of regret for what they did to their people?’

Kassorith shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I suppose that it fits, but that would make this titan quite an interesting figure.’

The scaled man didn’t elaborate, yet his meaning was clear. Titans who produced multiple Decrees were already rare, but casting multiple free-type Decrees was practically unheard of.

The whole alliance only had a couple dozen of them in total, and they were considered a peak faction. There might be fewer than a hundred free-type Decrees across the entire universe, so it would be quite ridiculous for a single person to have produced two of them.

The “penitent’s” handiwork might not be as impressive as that of the Moirai triplets, but the lone titan had achieved everything by themselves, unlike the famous sisters. Sure, the Ollorian deity’s first Decree had been riddled with flaws, but it was still one of the most powerful that Percy had ever heard of. Furthermore, the titan had cast it a very long time ago, before the alliance came to be, back when their faction had still been a lesser spring.

‘Are you sure you want to mess around with anything the Ollorians have created though?’ Micky asked again, sounding concerned. ‘Especially that person?’

‘Not really,’ Percy admitted with a frown. ‘But I’m sure that the description would have mentioned any drawbacks like those of their other Decree. It also sounds like it synergizes quite well with my affinity.’

The fact that they would acquire the Decree by consuming physical blood was somewhat worrying. Percy didn’t want to pick a Decree that would only affect Kassorith’s body, though he felt that the odds of that were low. The “penitent” sounded like a titan with a soul affinity, and their Decree appeared to ultimately attach itself to a person’s soul.

Other than that, spiritual blood seemed like an interesting resource that would open many new doors for Percy. Especially since he should be able to produce it much faster than others.

Sadly, he couldn’t mend his wisps if they got injured, as his bloodline merely slowed down their decay. However, his clones could still borrow phantom mana from his main body to heal their hosts’ souls.

Since Kassorith would also acquire the Decree, he would be able to infuse his blood between rounds with Percy’s assistance, giving them as much spiritual blood as they wanted.

Percy would rather not reveal his own mana during the actual fights, as that would expose him. It was only at Yellow, so what little he could send through the cord wouldn’t make much of a difference in a battle between Sixth and Seventh Circle mages anyway.

However, subtly using it to mend Kassorith's soul during their downtime shouldn't be an issue. On the off chance that somebody questioned the Thess'kalan's rapid recovery or production of the new resource, they would just have to blame everything on his bloodline again.

As for what spiritual blood actually did?

Well… Percy had only skimmed through the auxiliary documents earlier, so he went through them more carefully this time. As far as he could tell, its applications could be grouped together into four main categories: each interesting to him for a different reason.

Their combined effect wouldn't necessarily boost Kassorith's strength in the next round more than a powerful mindset, but they were all things that Percy wouldn't be able to accomplish without the Penitent's Decree, and their scope extended far beyond the competition.

All things considered, it was easily the best option available to him at the moment. He felt that he had a good chance of acquiring it permanently, and that it would serve him well in both the tournament and the long-term.

'What do you think?' he asked the others after discussing the potential benefits with them for several minutes.

'Its impact on our next couple of fights won't be massive, but the same is true for the other options,' Kassorith conceded. 'I'm not looking forward to ripping chunks out of my soul, though it sounds like a good match for my bloodline. And yours I suppose.'

'I'm also sold,' Micky concurred, sounding more enthusiastic than the Thess'kalan. 'The fact that they're still discovering new applications for it is promising. We'll also get to mark the Ollorians' planet, which is a welcome bonus.'

Percy nodded. This was something that he hadn't considered, yet the Huehuan was right. With this, they would have two of the founding worlds marked, allowing them to revisit them at will. It wouldn't be a bad idea to try and mark the other two as well. Maybe some of the other factions too.

‘Actually, the Void Hand is bound to own a few Elemental Sources and Rings of Sacrilege. It might even be worth picking a shitty Decree later if it gives me an excuse to travel to those worlds,’ he realized.

In hindsight, it was a little strange that Metatron hadn’t brought this topic up. Then again, his spies had probably already told him where the resources were held. He just didn’t want to share the information with Percy until he accepted his terms. Unlike the Void Decree that the titan hoped to directly get his tentacles on through Kassorith, he had nothing to gain by sending Percy to an Elemental Source.

‘Well… screw him. I can look into this on my own. I don’t even have to take any huge risks: just lay the groundwork so that I can return when I’m much stronger.’

A problem for later. Right now, Percy and his companions had already agreed to claim the Penitent’s Decree, and they should have more than enough time left before their next match to do that.

About an hour after submitting their choice through the terminal, they were greeted by the same attendant who had guided them around earlier. She informed them that she’d been assigned as their handler for the remainder of the tournament, so she would be the one responsible for procuring any resources they requested or escorting them to special sites.

After realizing that he would be seeing a lot more of the female Maradorian over the coming weeks, Percy finally did what he should have honestly done sooner and asked for her name.

Introducing herself as Nawko, the humanoid frog led his host to the building they had passed through upon getting beamed down from the space station. Apparently, the structure was some sort of interstellar teleportation hub, offering access to some of the Void Hand’s most important planets.

Percy was somewhat shocked by how easily these people could travel across the stars, though he probably shouldn’t be. Couldn’t he do the same using Metatron’s Decree? It would have been strange if a peak faction couldn’t match that.

Stepping onto the enchanted platform, they were sent to a ruined cathedral, its roof half collapsed. The natives hadn’t even bothered to sweep the broken tiles off the floor, Kassorith’s tail carving deep grooves through the centimetre-thick layer of dust as he slithered toward the exit.

Leaving the dilapidated building, they found themselves in an even more dilapidated city. The streets were cracked and coated in filth, the surrounding structures looking old and worn. The whole place stank of illness, the very air polluted as the sky was covered in dark clouds.

For a second, Percy couldn't help but question whether their guide had brought them to the wrong planet. While Nawko did admittedly wrinkle her amphibian snout in disgust, her expression remained otherwise flat.

There was no mistake, this shithole was Oll: the home of the Ollorians, one of the most powerful factions in the universe and a founding member of the Void Hand.

Chapter 637: Nergal

Percy double-checked with Nawko that this was indeed Oll before reaching to his main body and asking him to send a clone.

He had no intention of possessing anything right now, but this was his only way to leave a mark on the planet. To use Ludwick's Compass properly, Percy needed to fly back to Remior through the plane of souls and memorize the path from his marks. Unfortunately, teleporting from Oll to Marador Prime and leaving from there wouldn't cut it.

The good news was that his main body would easily be able to direct a second clone to him. The new wisp would merely have to locate the current clone in his expansive soul sight: a process that would only be made smoother by their mutual attraction: drop a mark on him, and return without touching anything.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the Maradorian gestured at Kassorith to follow her as she set course for what she claimed to be another teleportation hub. It would supposedly tap into the local teleportation network rather than the interstellar one that they had just passed through.

Having use both types before, Percy honestly couldn't tell the difference. Logically, he understood that travelling across a far greater distance would require more power, but he hadn't felt it. Perhaps only a god or a space affinity user could recognize the nuances of superluminal travel.

'Should I pick a space affinity for my third core if I do get to choose?' he wondered.

Then again, there were plenty of other affinities that he would love to have. Time or karma would be great, and life would synergize well with his bloodline. Of course, he didn't even know for sure whether the Void Decree would stack favourably with the Moirais', or whether he and Kassorith would make it far enough into the tournament to earn it, so he might be getting ahead of himself.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he decided to focus on the present. Oll might not be the prettiest place, but that was exactly why he ought to pay attention to his surroundings: he might never visit this planet again.

The architecture was very different from Marador's. The brick buildings and cobblestone streets were dirty and badly maintained, reminding Percy of Twilight City's poorest districts. This wasn't what he would have expected of even a weaker greater spring like Thess'kala, let alone a founding faction of the Void Hand.

Percy spotted plenty of civilians as well: though he would have much preferred that he hadn't. Some of those poor souls appeared to live in constant pain, their physical deformities severely impairing their every action.

Most notable was a man with a second, smaller head on his left shoulder, its scalp fused into the left cheek of his functional head. The second head appeared entirely dead, its eyes glassy and unmoving as its nose and mouth were little more than a bumpy slab of skin, marred with a handful of tiny holes.

There was also an older woman who still had a Yellow core despite her advanced age. A Red-born, most likely. She was missing three limbs, and even her left leg was half its normal length. Hopping all the way from what Percy guessed was her house to a shop located four blocks down the street left her out of breath, making Percy wonder how she had even survived this long.

All in all, watching these people made Percy's borrowed skin crawl. He'd seen plenty of disturbing things during his travels, but this definitely took the cake. Evidently, the disfigured Blues and Violets that the Ollorians had sent to the void tournament were more like their success stories: those whose disabilities didn't hinder their magical careers as much, allowing them to reach a high enough grade to supplement their physical abilities with their domains.

Percy's companions didn't seem to take this sight very well either, despite the fact that Kassorith had undoubtedly committed his own share of atrocities in the past, and the Huehuan had experienced the horrors of the coliseum for decades.

Noticing the perpetual scowl on their scaled face, Nawko picked up the pace, probably being just as eager to get this trip over with.

Another thing that stood out was that these people didn't seem to care as much as the Maradorians about letting their alien guests mingle with their civilians. Perhaps they didn't get as many visitors: shocker: or maybe those who did come here to claim one of their Decrees were less likely to stir trouble.

'Or they simply don't care as much if somebody goes nuts and butchers a bunch of mortals…'

Reaching another cathedral-like building: albeit a smaller one: Nawko asked a hunched Green with an upside-down nose for the correct teleportation pad to "Nergal's resting place".

However, she'd already turned to face the correct platform before the man confirmed it, suggesting that she'd either been here before or had received very detailed information from her superiors about this trip.

"Nergal… is that the true name of this 'penitent' guy?" Percy asked as soon as they hopped off the other end of the teleportation pad, seemingly located in the middle of a swamp.

The Maradorian nodded. "He can be considered their patron deity, though their feelings on him are understandably rather mixed. As you may have figured out already, Nergal's Decree is their ancestral Decree. The one that made them… you know…" she explained, waving her index finger around her face.

Percy nodded too, her words confirming his earlier suspicions. "What did you mean by 'resting place' though? Is Nergal dead?"

"He is. I'm not too familiar with the specifics, but he supposedly killed himself while casting his second Decree, partly to strengthen the new one, and partly to punish himself for his sins. I guess he hoped that the Penitent's Decree would reverse the Ollorians' deformities, though things clearly didn't go as

planned. It wasn't until a long time later that a different titan managed to stop the situation from worsening."

Percy swallowed hard as he realized that Nergal might have not been as much of a genius as he and Kassorith had previously deduced. Sure, casting not one but two free-type Decrees was nothing to scoff at, but both had been severely flawed. The first had eternally cursed his people, while the second had consumed his own life.

Once again, Percy reminded himself to think twice before possessing an Ollorian in the future. Other than figuring out how to avoid granting the Moirais' Decree to his hosts, he should also learn how not to accidentally absorb new Decrees without fully understanding what they did.

Locating the sacred site wasn't very difficult.

Kassorith and the attendant didn't encounter any other Ollorians, merely having to follow the single, well-trodden path through the bog where the foliage had receded. Eventually, they reached a strange hill.

The place was pitch black, the natives having not even bothered to install any torches or enchantments to illuminate the area. Was it out of carelessness, or spite toward the deceased deity?

Judging solely by the decrepit state of their cities, the former was certainly possible, but Percy wouldn't blame them for harbouring a grudge toward the dead titan either.

It was also possible that he was overthinking it, and the Ollorians just didn't expect somebody qualified to receive the Decree to have much trouble navigating the swamp in near complete darkness. An assumption that would be fair: in Percy's case at least: as his enhanced senses easily brushed over the small hill from a couple of kilometres away.

'That's not dirt!' Micky pointed out in alarm, and even Kassorith couldn't help but crease his brow.

On closer inspection, the "hill" was a huge pile of flesh and limbs, countless deformed hands and misshapen feet flailing wildly across its surface. The sight caused the Thess'kalan to freeze in his tracks.

Percy carefully scanned the disturbing mass for any sign of a soul or a mana core, trying to determine whether it was alive, somehow. He found neither, though he didn't know whether he should be relieved or horrified by that.

Clearly sensing their apprehension, the guide rushed to placate them. "I take it that you've caught sight of our destination already. Those are some sharp senses you've got there. But don't worry. That thing is not really alive: it's just what happened to Nergal's body after he cast the Penitent's Decree. Today, it's merely the instrument that grants his legacy to his inheritors."

"That's Nergal's body?!" Percy blurted out in disbelief.

Nawko's explanation had done very little to improve his mood. In his mind, gods were lofty beings who had ascended past their mortality, attaining not only eternal life, but also eternal youth, health and beauty. Reaching the Concept realm had been Percy's dream for as long as he could remember, so seeing a deity reduced to this pathetic state didn't sit well with him.

That said, they hadn't come here to lament the titan's grim fate, but to claim their new Decree.

Suppressing his disgust, he seized control of his host's body once more, pushing forward. A small lake of putrid blood pooled at the base of the throbbing ball of flesh. Slightly fresher blood was gushing out of countless holes across the undying fountain, trickling down the bumpy landscape to supplement the pool.

The mere thought of ingesting the vile substance made Percy recoil, his only solace being the fact that he wouldn't be doing it with his own mouth. As for the owner of said mouth, the horrific sight had thankfully left him too numb to muster more than a weak protest as Percy leaned over the crimson surface.

Recalling the instructions, he knew that he had to personally scoop a handful of the liquid for this to work, so he didn't bother to use his willpower or mana for the task. He only hoped that his host's hand would suffice in place of his main body's.

The moment the putrid sludge touched the Thess'kalan's forked tongue, Percy cursed his enhanced senses for the first time since he upgraded his mutation, though he forced both himself and his spectral companions to swallow the blood regardless.

An oddly cool feeling exploded out of their stomach almost immediately, permeating their flesh and bones. For a second, Percy was worried that he had made a mistake about the nature of the Decree, though his concerns were promptly put to rest.

The soothing sensation wasn't hindered by their physical body in the slightest, seeping even deeper. Percy wasn't sure what Kassorith was experiencing, but he personally felt the cool touch on his own wisp, gently remoulding it into something new. For all the flaws of Nergal's Decrees, the titan had at least managed to make the acquisition smooth and painless enough.

The feeling died down after a couple of minutes, Percy's Status swiftly informing him of his success.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new Decree: Penitent's Decree!]

Chapter 638: Spiritual Blood (1)

Kassorith sat atop his coiled tail in stern concentration, shaving small chunks of his soul one after the other to infuse into his bloodstream.

It had already been a couple of days since Percy and his host returned from Oll, and they hadn't slacked much during that time. Well… okay… They may have given themselves an hour or two at first, mostly to calm down and purge the unsettling imagery of malformed people and fleshly hills from their minds. Even for seasoned mages such as themselves, there were things that could churn one's stomach in all the wrong ways.

Once they decided to stop procrastinating, they used a terminal to swiftly locate the nearest inn, making sure to book a room that wasn't on the ground floor. As beautiful as the sight of the Maradorian ocean was, Percy didn't want to look at it without pause.

He wasn't sure how the natives could handle staring at the endless abyss all day long. Perhaps, as amphibians, they were used to spending a lot of time underwater, to the point that the aquatic expanse looked no different from one's garden. To them, watching a bunch of fish swimming beneath their webbed feet was probably like listening to birds chirping outside their bedroom window.

Leaving the Maradorians' architectural preferences aside, Percy had been more than happy to rid himself of the distraction. He might have even enjoyed his stay in the cozy room if not for the Thess'kalan's agonized groans.

'Can you stop letting your pain spill through our connection?' Percy asked, and not for the first time. 'There's no reason to make us suffer alongside you.'

'Easy for you to say. You only have to lean back and use some of your mana to mend my wounds. Meanwhile, I've spent the past few days doing the spectral equivalent of skinning myself alive. It fucking hurts,' Kassorith protested.

Percy rolled his borrowed eyes. 'I assure you that I'm quite familiar with every manner of soul pain. If you think this is bad, you should try absorbing a couple of spectral fiends. Besides, my job isn't as easy as you make it sound. It takes a lot of focus to heal your wounds while keeping the stitches in place.'

He could practically feel his host's irritation bubbling up, though the scaled man ultimately kept his thoughts to himself. Everyone understood that they didn't have time to waste on pointless quibbling. It didn't look like they would manage to replace all of Kassorith's blood before their first match, but even a third of it might make a difference.

Pulling up his Status, Percy read the last section again, focusing on the new entry.

___

[Penitent's Decree] – Allows one to shed small pieces of their soul to infuse into their bloodstream, producing spiritual blood.___

Stripped of all the notes and caveats, the Penitent's Decree appeared relatively simple. Of course, Percy would have struggled to figure out the applications of his host's spiritual blood if not for the millennia of research notes that the Void Hand had generously given them access to.

The first application was relatively straightforward, on top of being quite relevant for the tournament: saturating one's veins with spiritual blood accelerated their physical recovery.

Percy was convinced that this was, in fact, the original purpose of the Decree. Piecing together what little information Nawko and the documents had shared about Nergal's past, Percy had come up with what he felt was an educated guess about the titan's motivations.

As a god with a soul affinity, Nergal had been unable to directly affect his people's flesh with his Decrees. He had instead attempted to boost the potency of their magic by altering their souls, and he had clearly succeeded at that.

What the titan hadn't expected, was that the Ollorians' bodies weren't able to withstand their empowered souls. That had resulted in a lot of damage accumulating over the course of their lives and across generations, slowly twisting their forms into the monstrous visages they wore today.

To undo his mistake, Nergal had tried to cast a second Decree that would heal his people. Unfortunately, he must have still lacked the means to directly enchant their bodies, so he had sought a way to accomplish that indirectly, by infusing their souls into their blood.

And the rest was history.

For better or worse, the titan hadn't lived long enough to witness his second failure. Percy wasn't sure how the Ollorians had managed to repair their original Decree in the end, since they hadn't shared the information with the rest of the alliance. Or maybe the Void Hand just didn't bother giving the tournament's participants access to that knowledge.

Based on what Metatron had told Percy about collaborative Decrees, it shouldn't be easy for a titan to modify another's spell. It was more likely that the Ollorians had created a second Decree: likely cast by a god with a life affinity this time: strengthening their flesh enough to properly contain their empowered souls.

At least, this was the first thing that Percy would have attempted, had he been in their shoes: and had these people even worn shoes, though that was somewhat impractical for obvious reasons. Sadly for them, the new Decree or whatever else they had done had only prevented further damage to their bodies, yet failed to turn the clock back.

All of this was admittedly just Percy's speculation.

However, assuming that he had guessed correctly, he had certainly made the right call by not asking his main body to send a clone to Oll. Had he done that, he might have acquired Nergal's Decree, but not the second one that the Ollorians had used to counteract it, dooming himself to a ghastly fate. If he figured out a way to grab the second Decree as well: or another like it: he could potentially reconsider, but that was more of a long-term project.

Either way, faster regeneration would be useful in the competition: especially since Kassorith wasn't allowed healing potions or any other external source of life mana.

Even outside the tournament, spiritual blood supposedly synergized well with other forms of healing, meaning that Percy was in for quite a treat once he returned to Remior.

Life mana worked by bolstering one's healing factor. An experienced life mage like Archibald could accomplish that far more efficiently than a mindless potion, but the underlying principle was the same, so both would further multiply an already-boosted recovery rate.

Consequently, Percy hoped that his spiritual blood would work well with his trollsfury tattoos. Having easily endured Yellow potions during his fight against Deimos, he'd long been confident in handling even the Green tattoos without crippling himself, though it would have still been somewhat unpleasant until recently. Thanks to his reinforced bones and new Decree, he was now much more eager to put the powerful tattoos to the test.

The second application of spiritual blood was more relevant to their bloodlines.

Apparently, it would allow a severed limb to survive a lot longer, and even maintain a faint connection to its owner. According to the research notes, Percy might be able to chop off his hand and still move his fingers or feel their touch from afar.

In many ways, it was analogous to how he could control his soul constructs remotely, and even have them move by themselves. The difference was that this applied to flesh fuelled by spiritual blood rather than constructs made of mana, but it wasn't very surprising that the two effects were similar, since they had been caused by the same affinity.

Not that Percy had any intention of mutilating his main body just to see what happened: a few half-dead limbs wouldn't be all that beneficial either: but that was not to say that this ability was useless.

Micky could already detach pieces of his elemental body and control them remotely, albeit with severe restrictions. At the end of the day, his body required his cores and soul to function, so his discarded body parts currently worked more like mana constructs than true extensions of himself.

But what if he combined the two effects?

The water permeating the Huehuan's icy veins was functionally identical to blood, so he should be able to alter it in the same way. Hopefully, that would allow him to produce full-sized, independent copies of himself, much like how Archibald's life clones worked.

Due to his shapeshifting abilities and connection to Percy, they might be able to do all sorts of additional things too, though it would probably take a lot of testing to determine what was or wasn't possible.

Interestingly, Kassorith's bloodline was also a great fit for the new Decree.

Whenever the Thess'kalan activated his ability, he discarded a damaged husk of his flesh that carried most of his injuries. Meanwhile, his true self receded into a new body that was smaller and healthier than before. He could even consume the excess flesh to swiftly recover much of his lost mass.

Having discussed the effects of the Penitent's Decree extensively before claiming it, Percy and his companions were confident that spiritual blood would bolster Kassorith's bloodline in three major ways.

Firstly, his enhanced recovery should minimize the damage before he activated the bloodline, meaning that he would shrink less than usual. Secondly, he might be able to maintain some control over the empty husk, using it as a scout or distraction. Finally, Kassorith would potentially regain more mass after consuming it.

It would still be difficult to find an opportunity to use his ability during a heated battle. However, Lanthaniel had mentioned that the group phase of the competition included a few special events, so Percy wouldn't mind having another trick up his sleeve or two.

The last two applications of spiritual blood were even more exciting, as they mainly concerned soul affinity users.

Chapter 639: Spiritual Blood (2)

Lifting his host's hand, Percy gathered some metal mana to the tip of his thumb, shaping it into a claw. With a swift motion, he stabbed it into a gap between the Thess'kalan's reinforced scales, cutting his palm open.

It took a bit of effort due to his host's higher grade and stronger physique, but a single drop of blood barely managed to seep out of the injury before it started to close. It was admittedly a small wound, but Percy was still surprised by how rapidly it was healing: especially considering that they'd only converted a fraction of Kassorith's blood so far, and they hadn't used any life mana.

'Promising,' he thought, causing his host's gums to morph into a grin.

Closing his fist around the crimson bead to shield it from prying eyes, Percy allowed his senses to sink into the liquid, causing it to squirm as if it were alive. Recalling the appearance of the first spectral fiend he had ever absorbed, he willed the blood to transform into a thirteen-legged spider, its long limbs bending in all the wrong directions.

Percy's borrowed heart skipped a beat when he felt himself wriggling inside a giant, scaled palm, scanning a set of colossal fingers that curled over his minuscule body. It was like he had just gained not only a brand-new limb that he could control as easily as breathing, but also a new sense bundled with it.

Granted, what he was currently experiencing wasn't regular eyesight, but rather a weird blend of Soul Vision, a thermal sense and a sense of touch. Still, it fed into his Sage's Pond like all of his other senses, expanding its range slightly.

The difference was small for now, but Percy suspected that it would increase if he were to open his hand and expose the construct to the outside world. More, perhaps, if he allowed it to move away from his body.

This was the third application of spiritual blood, and it was exclusive to not just any random soul affinity user, but specifically one who had absorbed a spectral fiend.

According to the documents, some scholars argued that this should be considered an extension of the second application, since it was based on the same principle that allowed one to remotely control a severed body part.

However, the gulf separating the two approaches was like night and day. By tapping into the latent instincts of the spectral fiend, it was possible to swiftly and effortlessly create a far more manoeuvrable and capable construct.

A regular person who chopped off their fingers would merely produce a set of ten rigid, worm-like constructs that wouldn't be able to get very far or accomplish much. They'd also have to wait for their digits to grow back.

Meanwhile, someone like Percy could easily spill a pint of spiritual blood to unleash a swarm of dozens: if not hundreds: of crimson fiends that could spy for him over a large area.

Unfortunately, the bloody bugs were still fragile enough for even a Red-born child to crush between their fingers, but their potential value in a reconnaissance mission was undeniable. If they all fed into Percy's enhanced senses like this one did, he might be able to spread his Sage's Pond over an entire province.

Having absorbed as many as four different fiends: including even an Amorphos: Percy had more options than the average soul affinity user. He could freely shapeshift the constructs into forms more suited for a given environment, improving their manoeuvrability and making them harder to detect.

'It's such a pity that we can't use this in the tournament,' he thought with a sigh, clenching his host's fist to crush the wriggling insect into a lifeless smear.

He had fashioned it out of the only drop of spiritual blood that he had infused with a piece of his own wisp. However, he couldn't produce them at scale, because he wasn't able to mend his clone's injuries.

The rest of their spiritual blood technically belonged to Kassorith. While the Thess'kalan could access Percy's spectral traits while possessed, the ethereal entities weren't a part of his own soul, so he couldn't impart their instincts into his spiritual blood.

Even if that hadn't been the case, Kassorith wasn't supposed to possess a soul affinity, nor any traits: the associated abilities had all been attributed to his bloodline.

'It is what it is,' Micky consoled. 'Maybe we should condense another drop or two to have in case of an emergency, but it's best if we can avoid using them.'

Percy nodded.

Other than providing his host with a faster recovery rate and various spying capabilities, there was one final application of spiritual blood that had actually been discovered fairly recently: by cosmic standards, at least.

It had nothing to do with combat or the tournament, and it was debatable whether it would ever benefit Percy, though he had still found it quite interesting. In fact, he'd be lying if he said that it hadn't played a huge role in his decision to select this Decree.

Spiritual blood could apparently be used as fertilizer for magical herbs.

Plants didn't possess the beast affinity, so they couldn't consume mana to advance. They also lacked sentience, so they were normally unable to cleanse their scattered cores like sapients could.

However, regularly watering a herb with spiritual blood for an extended period of time seemed to bolster its… well… spirituality: enough for it to develop some rudimentary instincts.

The plant wouldn't become capable of thought, nor would it be able to use an elixir, but it would still passively purify its core, vastly increasing its chances of advancing past Orange.

Sure, Yellow reagents occasionally emerged even without this process, but they were extremely rare.

The deities of the Void Hand had brushed the discovery aside as a somewhat shocking, but mostly useless curiosity. A Yellow ingredient just wasn't that valuable, and there was no record of anyone producing a Green plant.

Someone without the soul affinity wouldn't be able to keep up with the expenditure of cultivating even a single herb, and even a soul mage would have to spend several years, a lot of spiritual blood, and endure a lot of pain to maybe brew a Yellow potion.

Assuming that anyone was crazy enough to go through the trouble, they were more likely to place the final product in a museum than drink it, as it wouldn't even do much for anyone above Green.

In theory, all of this was doubly true for Percy, since he had a vastly superior method of brewing not just Yellow, but also Green potions through the compression principle. The only reason he couldn't currently produce anything better than that was because his cauldron wasn't strong enough to endure the pressure, but that would change as soon as he completed his artificial advancement.

However, he had an entirely different reason to be interested in this.

'I wonder if this will allow me to possess plants with my bloodline,' he thought, part of him wishing he could return home and test his idea out.

It wasn't like he hadn't considered this before, but plant souls were normally too underdeveloped to support his wisps. They barely registered in Soul Vision, and he struggled to even feel any sense of attraction or rejection from them regardless of their condition.

Before learning about the Penitent's Decree, he had been willing to bet that he would have an easier time possessing a bug: even a tiny, mundane one with a Brown core: than a herb. His new ability had inevitably caused him to question that.

As for why he would even want to possess a plant?

Well, he didn't have a very strong reason. It might teach him something new about magic or alchemy, or it might not. Perhaps he would be able to pass the Moirais' Decree to a herb, granting it a new affinity and modifying its properties, or he might discover something else entirely.

Whatever the case, Percy enjoyed trying new things and expanding his skillset in novel directions. This was how magic developed and how new frontiers were discovered, after all, and Percy's approach had

served him well in the past. Wasn't this precisely how he had invented Reinforcement, his Phantomspun Silk, and ultimately woven his Cloak?

Alas, his crazy experiments would have to wait a while longer. Even if the void tournament hadn't been ongoing, his main body was still busy with too many urgent matters to waste time trying to possess a bunch of flowers. Not to mention that he would have to spend years feeding them spiritual blood before he could even attempt it.

'Are you done daydreaming?' Kassorith suddenly asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Percy was about to snap back with something snarky when he noticed that the amethyst badge on his host's tunic was flashing quietly. Nawko had informed them that this was a signal for them to reach the venue of their next fight as soon as possible.

The second phase of the competition was finally about to begin.

Chapter 640: Monsters

Percy and his companions had to stop by a terminal first, to find out where they were supposed to go. Apparently, there were eight colossal stadiums set up specifically for the second phase of the tournament: for the Blues at least: each several times larger than the ones they had used in the preliminaries.

They weren't partitioned into smaller rooms either, consisting of a single, massive arena that spanned several kilometres, supposedly surrounded by enough seats for over a million spectators.

While the arenas themselves were significantly larger than those Percy and Kassorith had fought on in the regional tournament, participants weren't allowed to fly over the stadium this time, probably to avoid damaging the city. This would force them to contain their spells within a much smaller space. It was somewhat annoying, but they should still have enough room to fully display their power.

Another interesting difference from the previous event was that each stadium was assigned to a specific group for the entirety of the second round. Only a single match would be held there each day, and each participant had to fight against everyone else once, meaning that this round was expected to last for several months, with each person fighting every few weeks.

After learning that Kassorith had been placed in the fifth group along with seventeen others, Percy and his companions hopped onto one of their flying greatswords, taking off toward the designated venue.

'It'll take a hundred and fifty-three days for all the matches, not including the special events or any other breaks that we aren't aware of,' Percy calculated as they travelled over the city.

He frowned. That was a lot longer than he had expected. If he added the months Lanthaniel had spent bringing them to Marador Prime, and however long the elimination phase would last, this trip would easily take close to a full year.

Had this been any other destination, Percy would have been annoyed to spend so much time on a single planet, but he wasn't going to complain about staying in the capital of a peak faction. He just hoped that his main body wouldn't get into serious trouble before he was done.

'Look at the bright side. It'll give us a chance to learn a lot about the Void Hand, and to scout out our opponents before every fight,' Micky said.

'That's exactly what I had in mind,' Percy agreed.

Back on Thess'kala, he and Kassorith hadn't been able to watch every match, mostly because they had taken place back-to-back, with the whole event concluding within a few weeks. They had been too tired from their own fights, and too busy claiming rewards from the treasury to care about anyone else: at least during the earlier rounds.

This time, they couldn't afford to do things half-assedly, however. Many of their opponents were objectively stronger than them, so they had to at least try to prepare properly for each fight.

Sadly, following the other groups as well wouldn't be feasible, as there should be over a hundred and forty participants left in the tournament. However, they didn't need to do that, due to how the group phase was structured.

Percy and his companions would have plenty of opportunities to observe the others in their own group, watching each one anywhere between zero and sixteen times, depending on how early in the competition they met.

Hopefully, their enhanced senses would let them learn more about their rivals than anyone else, and the malleability of their enchantments would allow them to develop specialized formations for each match.

As for what came after?

Well… unfortunately, they wouldn't have nearly as much information about their opponents in the elimination phase: assuming they made it that far. Their final match before entering the top eight would be the toughest one. That said, there was no use in worrying about that when it was half a year away.

Other than studying their rivals, Percy would be able to use the downtime between fights to learn as much as possible about the Void Hand: their Decrees, Elemental Sources, Rings of Sacrilege, and every other location worth a damn.

He could only claim so many rewards from the tournament, but it would be a waste if he didn't do everything in his power to prepare for some future trips to the alliance's worlds. After all, wandering blindly across the stars in search of greater springs clearly wasn't working very well.

Percy was broken out of his thoughts when they reached the stadium.

Discarding the construct, his host slithered through a smaller entrance that they guessed was meant for the participants. The fact that they were required to scan their badge to proceed only served to confirm their suspicion.

Entering the arena, they found a vast, metallic floor unfolding before them, its smooth surface adorned with glowing runes like those they had seen in the preliminaries.

None of Kassorith's spells: not even the formations that had bordered on Seventh Circle power: had come close to scratching the enchanted floor, and Percy doubted that the Violets and Whites had had a much easier time doing that.

Obviously, the equipment in the void tournament was even more potent than what they used on Thess'kala, the organizers having gone above and beyond to ensure the safety of the participants and spectators.

Speaking of spectators, Percy was surprised to see that less than a third of the seats were full, despite the first match in his group scheduled to start in about half an hour. Kassorith wouldn't compete until two days later, though they still wanted to examine their opponents and familiarize themselves with the venue.

'Void tournament or not, I suppose that a million seats are too many to fill during the earlier stages of the competition,' Percy guessed, shifting his attention to more pressing matters.

Right next to the entrance they had just emerged from, Percy spotted most of the other Blues: fourteen of them: though three had yet to arrive. To no one's surprise, almost everyone had come from the founding factions, except for Kassorith and one other person.

He was a tall man with a green, mossy beard, wearing loose-fitting robes woven out of thick vines. The first time Percy had seen an Aflegian, he had mistakenly thought that they were humanoid plants, though he had lost interest when Kassorith explained that they were just flesh and blood outside of their facial hair.

Interestingly, the female Denyte that had caught his eye after the evaluations was also in his group. A wave of excitement surged through his borrowed chest as he realized that he would get his chance to compete against the talented woman with the time affinity a lot sooner than he had expected.

'Hmmm… other than her, there's also that Maradorian who has a Green second core,' Kassorith pointed out. 'Assuming that we can overcome everyone else: which is admittedly a big assumption: these two should be the most troublesome by far.'

Percy nodded internally. Judging from their badges, most of the others hadn't performed much better than his host in the preliminaries. The short Denyte that he had singled out before and the man with the Void Decree were the only ones that really stood out from the rest.

Leaving the woman's time affinity and blessing aside, the male frog-person's mana types were also readily apparent to Percy. He possessed a dust affinity in his first core and a: thankfully weaker: life affinity in his second.

Funnily enough, his silver skin would suggest that he possessed a secondary soul affinity as well due to his ancestral Decree, granting him a higher resistance against Percy's primary element.

'Joke's on you… I can't use it anyway,' Percy thought, the corners of his host's lips curling up.

Of course, that didn't mean that this person would be easy to defeat. Most of the Maradorian's opponents probably lacked the soul affinity, yet he had still made it to the top eight despite rarely being able to make use of his secondary affinity. And he had done all of that with a single core. Right now, he had the Void Decree and probably all the other free-type Decrees as well, on top of a powerful bloodline or something.

This was a bit of a problem, since Percy and his companions needed to reach the top two in their group to qualify for the next round. That meant they would have to defeat either the female Denyte or the male Maradorian, on top of not making any mistake against anyone else in the group.

'It could have been worse,' Micky consoled. 'At least there's nobody with two Blue cores.'

'I feel like you shouldn't have said that,' Percy replied, his smile turning bitter.

Before his friend had a chance to respond, one of the missing participants entered the boundary of their Sage's Pond. It was a male Inimit with a steam affinity in his sternum… and a space affinity: of all things: in his abdomen. Both at Blue.

'Well… shit,' the Huehuan spat as their host's face twisted into a grimace. 'I guess that one's on me.'

Percy remained extremely tense over the next twenty minutes or so, fully aware that their odds of securing the Void Decree had just fallen off a cliff. Thankfully, the remaining two contestants eventually arrived, and neither possessed a second core.

Even so, there were three monsters in their group, and only two spots to the next round…