Wanderer 641

Chapter 641: First opponent (1)

The first match of Kassorith's group was held between the man with the mossy beard and a female Ollorian.

Since the Aflegian was one of the rare few participants from a weaker world to have made it to the second round, Percy wasn't surprised by his skill. Wielding a lava affinity augmented with the same blessing of heat that Gabe had, he was a balanced fighter capable of smoothly switching between scorching attacks and rock-solid defences.

Each spell he cast left rippling veins of molten blue across the arena floor, the air above them warping as if the dense liquid itself was breathing. Even from the side of the battlefield, Percy could feel the faint prickle of heat brushing against his host's scales.

The moss-bearded mage appeared to possess some kind of speed-enhancing bloodline that made up for the relatively lower mobility of his mana types, allowing him to manoeuvre across the arena like a predator and unleash his spells on his opponent from every direction. His boots barely seemed to touch the ground; one moment he stood at the edge of the lava pool, the next he blurred to the side, reappearing in a spray of sparks and magma.

Had he participated in the regional tournament on Thess'kala, the Aflegian would have probably beaten everyone with ease, including Kassorith and Percy who had been far weaker at the time. To Percy's growing horror, however, the green-haired man found himself at a severe disadvantage against the disfigured woman from the very start of the fight.

While her malformed left leg with a seemingly stiff knee would normally impair a person's mobility, the Ollorian shouldn't have much trouble moving around by relying on her mana and willpower. Only, she clearly didn't feel the need to bother with chasing her opponent. She stood rooted in place like a crooked pillar, her weight resting unevenly on that twisted limb.

Her plasma mana was hotter and heavier than it had any right to be, easily piercing the blobs of lava even though she didn't have a blessing of her own. Remaining fixed in the same spot, she merely waited for the Aflegian to waste his resources against her defences, punishing him with a well-placed counterattack whenever he dared to approach.

At first, Percy thought that the lava user could at least withdraw and keep his distance from her if he needed to refill his core, but he was quickly proven wrong. The disfigured woman appeared to possess a bloodline of her own, allowing her to compress and shoot her attacks much faster and farther, sniping through the Aflegian's barriers regardless of where he tried to escape.

'Damn, Nergal's Decree isn't a joke!' Micky cursed through their connection. 'It's almost worth screwing up your body for that kind of power. Almost.'

Percy mentally nodded, though his attention remained glued to the battle. The outcome of the match was practically a forgone conclusion, but he didn't care as much about who won as he did about studying the combatants. His thoughts moved faster than his eyes, cataloguing every fluctuation of mana, every twitch of muscle, every subtle shift in breathing.

In theory, his Sage's Pond could cover about half of the arena at full power. Sadly, that didn't mean much when he was forced to watch from the sidelines. Especially since he couldn't send his willpower into the stage without being accused of interfering with the match, further limiting the range of his senses.

Still, he did what he could, slowly building a profile for the two mages. After using Greater Foresight for decades and possessing all sorts of hosts, he was familiar with most affinities and capable of predicting a mage's attacks after minimal exposure.

However, his understanding of generic mages wouldn't cut it in this competition.

Percy wanted to go further. To study the strengths and weaknesses of each of his rivals: how fast they could move, how strong their attacks were, how their bloodlines worked, how their abilities interacted with one another, how long they took to activate, how much mana their spells cost…

The better he understood the nuances of his opponents' magic, the faster he would be able to adapt to their spells during his matches, and the further into the future he would be able to see while fighting them. On top of that, he wanted to spend his downtime preparing specialized enchantments for each battle.

The match only lasted about fifteen minutes and didn't teach Percy as much as he would have liked, but it was a start. The good news was that the schedule for the entire group phase was known, and he wasn't going to fight against either of those two until a few matches down the line, giving him ample chances to spy on them.

Returning to the inn, he worked with his companions to sort through everything they had learned today. In the future, Percy would be splitting his time between preparing for the fights and researching the Void Hand, but he wanted to at least generate an initial profile for all the participants before doing anything else.

On the second day, the female Denyte with the time affinity fought against an Inimit with an ice affinity. Percy was excited to see how the Inimits' faux-runecrafting Decree worked, though he would probably have to find another opportunity to do that.

The "battle" barely lasted fifteen seconds, and not much happened in that time. The moment the Inimit tried to approach the woman, all the mana in her immediate vicinity: including her opponent's: flew into her body seemingly of its own accord.

With his core dried up, the winged man plopped down weakly, hitting the arena floor with a muted thud. He avoided any injuries by wrapping his domain around his body, but he was in no position to keep fighting without mana, so he promptly surrendered. The silence that followed felt heavier than any explosion.

'What the fuck just happened?!' Kassorith asked.

'Beats me,' Percy replied with a mental shrug.

He'd kept a large part of his attention on the Denyte, scanning her body from head to toe, yet he was still unable to say with any certainty what she had done. She had clearly used some combination of time mana and a bloodline, though it wasn't clear which component had done what.

Percy and his host left the stadium in an even worse mood than the previous day. The female Ollorian from before had looked like a tough opponent, but one that they could potentially beat with a good strategy and sufficient preparation.

The Denyte, on the other hand, was not only impossibly powerful, but even gathering information on her might prove difficult if all her fights ended this swiftly.

On the third day, it was Kassorith's turn to fight.

Luckily, his first opponent wasn't one of the two-cored mages, but rather a male Denyte with a head of milky-white hair that was indicative of a steam affinity. Leaving aside his female compatriot that Percy was rightfully wary of, it was actually fortunate that they were facing a Denyte in their first match, as their ancestral Decree was arguably among the least dangerous.

The Ollorians' Decree directly empowered their spells, as did the Inimits': in addition to infusing them with all sorts of unpredictable effects. Meanwhile, Denytes and Maradorians probably only had an advantage in endurance.

That was still nothing to scoff at, but Percy and his host also excelled in prolonged fights, as they could slowly build their enchantments up and adapt to their opponents. Outlasting the steam mage wasn't going to be easy, but it certainly sounded better than getting eliminated in the first couple of seconds without even being able to react.

Reality proved more brutal than Percy's expectations, however. The Denyte wasn't able to use his extra mana to directly raise the quality of his spells, but he could still spend it lavishly to increase the number and size of his projectiles, putting pressure on Kassorith from the get-go.

The Thess'kalan only managed to avoid the initial barrage of steam because Percy used his Violet-grade domain to yank him out of the impact zone. Willpower clamped around Kassorith's body, dragging him away from the incoming blasts mere heartbeats before the hissing steam swallowed the space he had occupied.

Not giving up, the Denyte consumed more mana to propel himself toward the scaled man, his hair shrinking in real time as he left a thick plume of steam in his wake.

'We were wrong! He's not going for a prolonged fight at all!' Micky noted.

The Denytes' Decree gave them a head-start that would slowly lose its value over the course of the fight, so it was in their best interest to go all-out from the beginning. Sure, they could also play it safe and try to outlast their opponents, but it appeared that the steam user found the former strategy more effective.

Not wasting time, the Huehuan coated their host's body in a thin layer of steel, stamping it full of rudimentary lightness runes and structural integrity enchantments. There was only so much that he could do with so little time, but Kassorith should be faster and slightly better protected with the runes than he had been without.

Too busy to reply to his friend, Percy kept flying away from the steam mage using solely his willpower, trying to buy time for the others to do something. Each second stretched thin, measured by the pounding of Kassorith's heart and the relentless roar behind them.

The Thess'kalan spent some additional mana to enchant a few flying longswords of his own, launching them toward their opponent. The runework on the blades wasn't any better than what Micky had managed to carve onto their armour, but it should give the constructs enough power to pause their pursuer's assault.

Right as the weapons were about to reach the Denyte, however, Percy felt the runes deactivate and the constructs grow slower and duller. They slammed onto an invisible barrier around the Blue, failing to penetrate his domain. The impact rang out like striking glass, followed by the dull clatter of lifeless blades dropping to the floor.

'What is it this time?!' Kassorith asked with a grimace. 'Some kind of anti-runecrafting bloodline?!'

Chapter 642: First opponent (2)

'That's why he's rushing towards us!' Percy realized. 'Don't let him get too close to our armour or it'll hinder us more than it helps.'

Dodging the Denyte's spells was already difficult without a layer of steel bogging them down. If they lost the lightness runes, they would be better off discarding their armour entirely and fighting naked.

Sending a mental nod back, Micky stopped adding thickness to the metal and instead focused on creating an enchanted greatsword to fly on. It would not only help them keep their distance, but it would also be easier to get rid of in case the Denyte managed to disable its enchantments.

For the next two minutes, Percy and his companions evaded the steam user by the skin of their fangs, focusing mostly on their speed and defences than fighting back. Explosions of superheated vapour chased them around the aerial battlefield, bursts of white obscuring their vision and causing the range of the Sage's Pond to shrink slightly.

Unfortunately, their opponent had started the battle with thrice their mana capacity, and still had twice as much as them, despite having burned through it like nobody's business.

Thankfully, their enchanted constructs utilized their limited resources far more efficiently than their opponent's spells, barely allowing them to stay outside his range. However, their core was drying up at an alarming rate. Each evasive manoeuvre felt slightly heavier than the last, the once-fluid flow of mana turning sluggish and thin.

'He's going to exhaust us!' Kassorith pointed out. 'Any ideas?'

'My predictions have grown more accurate,' Percy said, offering some hope to relieve his host's tension. 'Prepare a heating formation while I evade. And make sure he doesn't spot it before it's ready.'

'But he's able to deactivate our enchantments,' Micky protested.

'Only if he gets close enough,' Percy corrected. 'It should be fine if we shoot from afar.'

The Huehuan said nothing else, working with Kassorith to prepare their secret weapon. The intricate enchantment was placed on a metallic disk glued to the Thess'kalan's chest, hidden beneath his breastplate and a layer of concealment runes.

It took longer than usual to arrange the formation since Percy was too preoccupied with other matters to assist them, but they thankfully managed to complete it while still having enough mana to fuel it with.

‘It’s done, but we’ll only get one shot,’ Kassorith warned.

Hitting such an agile opponent from hundreds of metres away was a tall order, even with the element of surprise. Should they miss the first time, the Denyte would never give them a second chance whether or not they could muster up enough mana to charge the formation again.

‘Leave that up to me,’ Percy said, fully aware of how much depended on his success.

While his companions had been busy forging the disk, he’d fired a few enchanted longswords to gauge the range of their opponent’s bloodline. Each time the blades dimmed and faltered, he’d marked the invisible boundary in his mind like a cartographer sketching a coastline. It was possible that the Denyte had intentionally limited the reach of his ability to trick them, so Percy mentally added an overhead of about thirty percent just to be safe.

Once he felt that he had a good grasp on his opponent’s territory, Percy slowed down and allowed the steam mage to shrink the distance separating them slightly. Not enough to disable their only weapon: hopefully: but enough so that Percy could aim better. The roar of rushing steam grew louder as projectiles whizzed by Kassorith’s body, the sheer force behind them causing his enhanced bones to vibrate.

Kassorith and Micky obviously trusted Percy enough to not question his plan. Pouring what little mana they could spare into the enchantments, they caused the runes to thrum with barely contained power against the Thess’kalan’s chest as one layer after another came to life.

First, the runes engraved into the metal itself pulsed with enough heat to seep through the gaps between Kassorith’s reinforced scales. Then, the interlocking shards of steel amplified their power enough to scorch and sear his flesh. Finally, the overarching heating enchantment came this close to cooking the scaled man’s organs.

Percy and his companions did everything they could to avoid showing their anguish on their expression, not willing to clue the Denyte in. Kassorith’s bloodline and spiritual blood should help them recover rather easily after the fight, so they just had to endure the pain for now.

Focusing intently on the steam mage, Percy studied every flicker of his soul, every twitch of his muscles, and every flare of his mana core, causing the projections of the man's next moves to deepen. Future after future layered over one another in his mind, a tangled web of possible dodges and counters.

Turning around sharply, Percy fired a crimson beam of scorching air and concentrated lightning at the Denyte. The steam mage dodged it fairly easily, the powerful attack failing to so much as scratch the enchanted floor as Percy's final attack was rendered obsolete.

Still, Percy didn't panic. This hadn't been a real blast, but merely the shadow of a now-discarded future. Percy aborted the move before his opponent even registered what had just happened: or rather, what could have happened.

Trying again, he tested various permutations of the attack. He tried launching a few longswords as a distraction first, flying even closer to the Denyte before unleashing the formation, or waiting for a more opportune moment. Each failed prediction collapsed like brittle glass, replaced by another possibility.

After several fake attempts, he managed to fine-tune the move into something that the steam mage was barely fast enough to avoid, though Percy couldn't quite grasp a successful configuration.

'Something is wrong,' he told the others. 'His reaction speed is unnaturally high even when I throw every trick in the book at him. It's almost like we're dealing with a machine rather than a person…'

His thoughts trailed off as he suddenly realized what the problem was. The bastard probably had a mindset helping him. If he'd passed the preliminaries before, there was a good chance he'd claimed Emah-Nuub's Decree from a previous tournament. Even if he hadn't, it was entirely possible that a talented mortal from a peak faction could commission a specialist to give them whatever mindset they wanted.

Percy would have loved to get one too, but he didn't exactly regret not asking Metatron for it. Letting Phoebe into his head had already been quite a risk, but at least she had Remior's best interests at heart. The greedy pentapus was a different story entirely.

'Whatever you're going to do, hurry the fuck up!' Micky spat. 'We can't hold the formation charged for much longer!'

The disk was trembling now, the intense heat already burning the Thess'kalan's left lung. Gritting his gums, Percy considered his options. They needed to get closer to shrink the Denyte's reaction speed further, but they couldn't do so without letting his bloodline touch the formation.

Experimenting with a few more potential futures, Percy eventually settled on one that might work. The final part was somewhat blurry, making it a bit of a coin toss, but he understood that this was the best he was going to get.

Whether or not Percy was ready, his opponent took the decision out of his hands by beginning to recite a long chant. The words rolled across the stadium like distant thunder, nonsensical syllables thick with authority.

'He's using Jolthoria's Decree too! Shit, I can't let him complete it!'

Whether the steam mage was trying to augment his flying speed or the power of his attacks, the result would be the same.

Committing to his plan, Percy willed his armour to shatter into a dozen pieces, reshaping most of them into blades before launching them at his opponent and flying right behind the barrage.

The constructs grew dull and slow as soon as they entered the Denyte's range, allowing him to calmly slap them aside with a wave of willpower before firing countless steam blasts of his own at the approaching Thess'kalan.

'At least I interrupted his chanting,' Percy consoled himself as he dove into the lion's den.

Relying on his Violet-grade domain and now-runeless greatsword, Percy evaded the incoming projectiles, though many nicked his host's body, shaving off scales and chunks of flesh every time they so much as touched him.

The pain made him wince, but he didn't falter, closing the distance to the opposing Blue while using his body to shield the final metallic fragment from view: the one containing the charged formation. Percy had left it floating behind him, just outside the bloodline's range. He could feel it there: a silent sun waiting to be unleashed.

The steam user's lips parted into a victorious grin as most of Percy's projections revealed his host's demise. It was only when Percy couldn't get any closer that he and his companions finally let go of the accumulated mana.

Leaping aside at the last second, they allowed a thick, crimson beam to pass right by them, reaching the shocked Denyte in an instant. The steam mage tried to avoid the blast, though over half of his body was caught into the pressurized stream of energy, slamming him onto the floor of the arena with crushing force.

'I hope that's enough to keep him down,' Percy prayed with a grimace.

If his opponent had Jolthoria and Emah-Nuub's Decree, there was a good chance he possessed the Penitent's Decree as well. Crossing the threshold of fatal damage for the arena's enchantments to protect and disqualify the Denyte might be harder if his veins were full of spiritual blood.

Alas, there was nothing more that Percy could do. A wave of weakness permeated his host's body as their grip on the greatsword loosened, sending them plummeting. Kassorith crashed right next to a plume of rising smoke and steam just as it thinned enough to reveal his opponent's limp frame. The stench of ozone, iron, and burnt meat filled the arena as the spectating crowd grew quiet.

Several seconds passed, making it clear that neither combatant had enough strength to move. Still, the steam mage had suffered the most damage and had clearly been the first to collapse. Sure enough, a cold, automated voice suddenly boomed from everywhere at once, announcing the result of the battle:

"Fatal damage prevented. Victory goes to Kassorith."

Chapter 643: Adaptive Arsenal

In many ways, Kassorith's first match could be considered one of the most difficult for him in the entire competition. The male Denyte didn't exactly stand out among the Thess'kalan's opponents, but he was the only one that Kassorith had been forced to face without any prior knowledge.

The scaled man had slithered onto the stage blind, relying on instinct and hurried guesses rather than proper planning. At least, Percy didn't think that the fight would have been nearly this close if they'd

been familiar with the steam mage's skillset and prepared for it. Thankfully, this wouldn't be as much of a problem moving forward.

With over two weeks to get ready for their next battle, Percy and his companions took their sweet time replacing the rest of Kassorith's blood and healing his injuries.

The Thess'kalan's bloodline had been difficult to use in the regional tournament, because the matches had been held much closer to one another. This ceased to be an issue when they had all the time and food they needed to rebuild the scaled man's mass.

Moult appeared to synergize as well with the Penitent's Decree as they had predicted, though Percy's feelings about that were somewhat mixed. Leaving the tournament aside, Kassorith would be able to generate a lot of ruby powder for other people by shedding his skin and consuming regular food to regrow his body.

It was similar to Archibald's clones in that regard, but Kassorith should be able to produce the resource even faster, meaning that Metatron would be able to pass the mutation to all of his people relatively quickly.

'I should have charged him for it,' Percy realized, though it was too late to renegotiate with the pentapus.

His only solace was that the titan didn't seem to possess any bones or other hard body parts of his own, so he might be unable to personally absorb the powder.

Other than Percy's concerns about the Vault and his host's condition, he made sure to watch every match in their group to ensure that they weren't caught off guard again. Ignoring the roar of the crowd, he dissected every spell and movement that fell within his Sage's Pond: and even those that didn't: with clinical focus.

Kassorith's second match was against a male Maradorian with a metal affinity like his own, albeit augmented by a blessing. That was already quite annoying, since the man's mana type was arguably among the best for defence, and the blessing only made it even better.

If that hadn't been bad enough, the frog-person's skin sported a bright golden-white colour indicative of a secondary light affinity, granting him some level of resistance to higher temperatures, among other things.

Between his nigh-impregnable shell and his increased ability to withstand Kassorith's most potent attack, the Maradorian was almost impossible to take down. The cherry on top was that his faster mana regeneration ensured that Kassorith never stood a chance of outlasting him, and the incantations he chanted from within his metallic defences further empowered his magic. The rhythmic croaking of his spells echoed from inside the smooth dome, steady and infuriatingly calm.

This was exactly the sort of battle that would have stumped Percy if he hadn't studied the Maradorian beforehand. With over a week to prepare, however, he had managed to figure out a way to crack the man's armour.

The answer had been to add reversal runes to his prized formation to flip its effect from extreme heat to severe cold.

That alone wouldn't have been enough, since lightning mana was less effective at cooling things down than heating them up, and the reversal runes further lowered the efficiency of the enchantments. Even though the Maradorian didn't have any resistance towards cold temperatures, the freezing stream would have never made it through the reinforced steel.

This was why Percy had played around with flickering the reversal runes on and off, rapidly cycling between heat and cold to induce a powerful thermal shock and break his opponent's shell. Of course, he had still spent dozens of hours designing the enchantments so that they wouldn't destroy their own medium.

His host's third match was against the female Ollorian with the plasma affinity that they had watched on the first day of the competition. Her twisted leg was as unmoving as before, yet the air around her vibrated with barely restrained violence.

Their only way to avoid getting sniped down by the deformed woman had been to immediately spend over half of their mana to swiftly construct a thick barrier, engraved with a handful of simple enchantments. By adding more unit cells over the next minute or so, Percy and his companions further improved their shield, allowing it to withstand the Decree-empowered blasts.

The problem with that solution was that they had already consumed most of their mana, leaving them with very little to use for mobility or a counterattack. As a result, they were basically sitting ducks, unable to do anything but endure the Ollorian's unceasing onslaught.

Once again, it was Percy's preparations that saved the day.

Having seen this situation coming weeks ago, he had worked tirelessly to design unit cells that were as effective for their barrier as they were for their ultimate attack. Rather than going all-in on structural integrity enchantments, Percy used reverse-heating enchantments like those that had won him the second match.

Using the cold generated by the unit cells defensively, he negated the Ollorian's plasma attacks. Consuming lightning mana to counteract the woman's spells in this manner wasn't as efficient as Percy would have liked, but this approach allowed him to more easily recycle the metallic barrier into an offensive formation to fire back with.

Putting pressure on Kassorith's opponent, Percy was able to advance towards the somewhat-immobile woman and ultimately knock her out with a powerful attack.

Kassorith's matches never became easy per se, but they did grow easier as Percy and his companions collected more information about their opponents and came up with all sorts of interesting ways to take advantage of their runes.

Luckily, they wouldn't have to fight against the Denyte with the time affinity or the two-cored mages until later, so they remained undefeated for the time being, overcoming one powerful Blue after the other. Each victory drew louder cheers from the stands, though Percy barely registered them anymore.

Winning a battle granted them two points, allowing them to stay at the very top of their group: tied with a few others of course. Draws yielded only a single point to each participant, though they appeared to be somewhat rare in the void tournament. At least, Percy hadn't seen any match in his group end in a draw yet.

After the Thess'kalan's seventh victory, Percy was surprised by an unexpected notification.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Spectral Art: Instantaneous Formation: Masterful -> Spectral Art: Adaptive Arsenal: Masterful!]

Picking his borrowed jaw off the floor, it wasn't hard to see where the upgrade had come from, even though Percy hadn't exactly planned it.

Through his Instantaneous Imprint, Armament, and Formation spells, he had learned to leverage his Scribing trait and runecrafting skills to create enchantments, enchanted weapons, and even intricate formations in real time.

Percy and his companions had only grown better at this due to their impeccable teamwork and accumulated experience, allowing them to create much more powerful formations: and to do so faster than before.

However, it wasn't just the depth and potency of their magiscript that had improved, but also its breadth and adaptability. Having read dozens of new books and incorporated countless new enchantments into his arsenal after his last prolonged trip to the Vault, Percy had grown into a far more versatile enchanter.

His mind felt less like a toolbox and more like an ever-expanding workshop. His efforts in the tournament had taught him to apply his wealth of runecrafting knowledge on the fly, and to approach his fights more like dynamic puzzles to solve than rigid tasks to complete.

Managing all of his resources efficiently: be they mana, willpower, time, mental prowess, or even more situational things like his distance to an opponent and his relative advantages over them: Percy had slowly become able to build whatever he needed at any given moment or even alter his constructs as efficiently as possible.

Having already been classified as a Masterful spell, the upgraded Spectral Art was hopefully even closer to the peak of the tier, giving Percy yet another powerful weapon to fall back to. A quiet thrill ran through him at the thought of testing its limits with his own body.

It would be harder, as he wouldn't have access to Kassorith's assistance or affinity. Ice and phantom mana weren't nearly as compatible with the new spell as metal. Then again, that had also been true

about the previous iteration of his Spectral Art, yet Percy and Micky had still found ways to make it work, so it was probably just a question of time and practice.

'If you're done getting excited over your upgrade, we need to figure out how to win our next match,' Kassorith reminded.

Percy mentally nodded, his mood turning more solemn. His new spell notwithstanding, next week's battle promised to be a true test of skill. After all, they weren't facing any random opponent, but one of the three monsters in their group: the Inimit with a pair of Blue cores.

Chapter 644: Two-cored Inimit

The Denyte with the time affinity and the pair of two-cored mages were the only participants still tied with Kassorith at first place, since they had yet to lose a battle. Unlike the Thess'kalan, however, they had won their fights without exerting themselves much.

Consequently, Percy hadn't learned enough about their abilities to be confident in defeating them. Hell, based on what he'd seen, it might not even be possible to do so with an abundance of information, regardless of what clever tactics he devised.

He would have obviously preferred that the three monsters got pitted against one another before facing his host, but he'd known from the first day of the group phase that he had lost that particular dice roll.

The good news was that he had seen a little more of the Inimit's skillset than the female Denyte's. While Percy still had no idea how the time mage combined her affinity and bloodline to drain her opponents' mana, the bird person's fighting style wasn't nearly as mysterious.

He appeared to favour dominating his enemies with his steam mana and wide assortment of free-type Decrees, infusing his feathers with various fake enchantments to augment his defence, offense, or mobility depending on the situation: in a manner not too dissimilar from Percy's approach.

The two-cored mage avoided using his space mana unless forced to, either to preserve his most potent resource as much as possible, or to prevent his future opponents from studying his strongest moves.

It was honestly a good habit. Unleashing his most powerful affinity at the start of each battle would have shortened his matches against the weaker participants, but it might bite him in the ass when he faced a tougher opponent like the female Denyte or the two-cored Maradorian.

Unfortunately for Percy, there was no way he and his companions would win this match unless they came up with an answer for all of the Inimit's abilities.

Slithering to the middle of the arena with grim conviction, Kassorith stared into the two-cored mage's eyes, tightening his metaphorical grip on his metal mana so that he would be ready to unleash it the moment the battle started.

'I still think our beaks are prettier than theirs,' Micky told Percy privately, probably to relieve some of their shared tension.

'Yeah, but they've got wings,' Percy joked back.

'We have extra hands,' the Huehuan protested.

'Which you use mostly to play a weird flute,' Percy answered with a mental shrug. 'I'd pick wings any day of the week.'

Their brief banter was interrupted by the automated system's cold declaration: "Let the fight between Kassorith and Remlat commence."

Several things happened at the same time once the words fell.

Percy used his domain to pull his host away from their opponent, buying time for his companions to prepare their enchantments. Kassorith expelled a quarter of his mana through the gaps in his scales, stamping the liquid metal with unit cells as Micky replicated the runes and forged the material into armour and a flying greatsword.

The trio-in-one flew away and continued to improve their enchanted equipment with every passing second: a process that they had repeated several times throughout the tournament.

The Inimit vanished from their senses almost entirely.

It was no secret that the man possessed some kind of invisibility bloodline: in addition to his many other gifts. The ability wasn't all-encompassing by itself, but the winged man was able to supplement it with fake enchantments that granted his feathers the properties of concealment runes. He even appeared to have accounted for Soul Vision, having probably encountered many soul affinity users in previous tournaments.

Sadly for the Inimit, Percy never lost track of the ink-coloured silhouette trying to circle around his host. The Sage's Pond unfolded in every direction, incorporating a wide assortment of magical senses, including the ability to directly detect a person's willpower. Judging by the winged man's lack of a countermeasure, that had to be a rather rare sense even among the elites of the alliance.

Still, that didn't mean that evading the barrage of steam blasts would be easy. The moment their caster realized that he had lost the element of surprise, he switched to speed-boosting augmentations, combining his natural flight with a propelling stream of white mana to chase the fleeing Thess'kalan.

The Inimit even plucked some of his feathers, mixing them with magical projectiles and infusing the product with some kind of sharpness effect that allowed them to dig deeper into Kassorith's armour whenever they connected.

In theory, the two-cored mage's lavish expenditure should have caused him to run out of feathers fairly quickly, but his people appeared to regrow them much faster than other body parts.

Percy didn't know whether that was a biological adaptation that had followed the creation of their ancestral Decree, allowing them to utilize it better, or whether their titan had taken an existing ability into account when designing his spell.

Either way, the addition of the spiritual blood that was undoubtedly coursing through the bird person's veins only accelerated his regeneration further, replacing his organic ammunition in real-time.

Kassorith's core was drying up rapidly as he struggled to protect himself from the Inimit's onslaught. The Thess'kalan dodged most projectiles, though the few mana-coated feathers that he failed to avoid released sparks and crisp sounds as they cut into his thinning armour.

The barrage contained lots of duds too: steam projectiles that didn't contain a feather. Those weren't nearly as dangerous, but served as a distraction since Percy and his host weren't always able to tell the two types apart until they connected.

The Inimit fired many of the hollow spells intentionally, though about thirty percent were produced by yet another of the alliance's free-type Decrees. Efenat's Decree provided its owner with a small chance of passively generating a weaker echo of their attacks: which was sadly perfect for this situation.

It didn't help that Kassorith's metallic barrier was somewhat weaker than usual, though that was something the Thess'kalan had done on purpose.

Percy had asked his companions to include a variant of stability runes in their unit cells. Those were some of the earliest enchantments he had ever mastered, having originally studied them mostly to pass to Nesha, since they were useful for crafting spatial devices.

After his recent studies, he was now familiar with a variant that could be fuelled by other affinities to render an object resistant to space magic. Percy hadn't deemed fit to use them in the durability test, since the extra runes would otherwise weaken the constructs, and the spatial projectiles had only accounted for a small fraction of incoming spells.

In this battle, however, space mana made up half of the Inimit's reserves, so Kassorith couldn't afford to leave himself exposed to his opponent's strongest affinity. Of course, the winged man hadn't even bothered to use his second core yet. Its mere existence was enough to affect Percy's plans.

'We can't let this go on!' the Thess'kalan yelled internally. 'He's beating us in power, speed, and mana expenditure with just his first core!'

Percy grimaced, knowing that his host was right. Despite holding back, their opponent was slightly stronger than the others that they had faced. It wasn't surprising, since the Inimit had clearly managed to climb to the top eight in the past with just his steam affinity.

Percy could have potentially found a way to beat the winged person if it had been just that. Unfortunately, no matter what enchantments he and his companions had tried to prepare before the match, there was just no way to account for all of their opponent's abilities in a fair fight.

The only approach Percy had been able to come up with that held even a slim chance of working had been to prepare the perfect sneak attack and hope they caught the Inimit by surprise while he was still looking down on them.

Over the next couple of minutes, he worked with the others to prepare a formation and attempted to fire the superheated beam repeatedly at his opponent, exploring various possibilities.

After dozens of predictions and aborted shots, Percy was confident that he could threaten the steam mage, though none of his attacks had a high certainty of success. About two thirds of the predictions resulted in the Inimit dodging or resolving the attack solely through his composite affinity and ancestral Decree, while only the remaining fraction forced him to resort to his space mana.

'Hopefully he chooses the latter,' Percy thought, knowing that that would be the best-case scenario.

Approaching the two-cored mage, he shattered his host's armour and shot the sharpened fragments at his opponent as he usually did in preparation to unleash his prized formation.

The Inimit had certainly seen that move many times before, since Percy and his companions had used it multiple times in previous battles, but that was ultimately a good thing. If the winged man thought that he could easily resolve the attack, he was more likely to fall in Percy's trap.

Blocking the incoming projectiles with a burst of steam and willpower, the Inimit waited patiently for the main event, a confident smirk tugging at the corner of his beak.

Right as the scorching beam was about to hit him, the two-cored mage attempted to avoid the crimson stream by finally tapping into his space mana for the first time since the start of the battle. His body bent and twisted as his surroundings turned blurry, clearly trying to warp him out of the spell's path through a move similar to Nesha's Twisted Dance.

Avoiding the blast should have been trivial for the Inimit, but Percy didn't panic. If anything, his own borrowed lips parted into a savage, toothless grin as he confirmed that his opponent had made the wrong decision.

Reaching into the scattered shards of steel surrounding the Inimit: the same ones that the winged man had just deflected with his domain: Percy tapped into their enchantments, activating the stability runes.

The space surrounding the Inimit that had begun to shift was forcefully clamped in place, blocking the shocked Blue's escape.

Being the elite Seventh Circle mage that he was, the steam mage remained calm, almost emptying both cores to protect himself with both composite and rare mana. Judging from the jet-black wall of willpower and the ruffling of his feathers, he must have used his domain and ancestral Decree as well.

Two waves of extreme magical power collided into a colossal explosion that distorted the air above the arena and sent a tremor across the entire stadium. Percy scarcely noticed that even the drinks the nearest spectators were slurping got rattled by the shockwave, though most of his attention was focused on his opponent.

The entire building grew quieter as everyone stared into the giant cloud of steam with bated breaths, eagerly waiting for the result.

To Percy's immense disappointment, a lone silhouette was revealed as the pale fog thinned, the winged mage still hovering almost leisurely in the same spot. His feathers and clothes appeared somewhat dishevelled, and his mana cores were both down to about a quarter of their capacity, but the Blue wasn't injured, his expression just as confident as it had been a minute ago.

"It was honestly not a bad strategy, but sometimes the gap in power is too great to bridge with a bunch of petty tricks," the Inimit gleefully said while shaking his head.

Clenching their fists in frustration, Percy and Kassorith resumed their attacks, hoping that their opponent was more exhausted than he looked. The truth was that they weren't faring much better, however. Their own resources had grown even scarcer, and their most promising attack had already failed.

To no one's surprise, the Inimit: who no longer had any qualms about using both affinities: swiftly dispatched the Thess'kalan, ending the battle within less than half a minute through a decapitating disk of space mana.

“Fatal damage prevented. Victory goes to Remlat.”

Chapter 645: Rekindled hope

Countless gloomy thoughts swirled within Percy’s tired mind as his host flew back to the inn. Tall, metallic buildings engraved with colourful runes and an endless, watery abyss stretching beneath a thick layer of glass were mostly ignored as Percy went over his brutal defeat for what felt like the millionth time.

He wasn’t very used to getting his ass handed to him. He generally tried to pick his battles wisely and, as long as there was even the slimmest hope of winning, always did his utmost to grasp it. Granted, he’d cut it close many times before, but he usually succeeded in the end.

‘Not this time, I suppose.’ He sighed.

A part of him had admittedly expected this outcome for months. After all, Percy had watched the three elites utterly destroy their previous opponents and he was well aware of his host’s shortcomings. Still, the reality of the situation made Percy reevaluate the choices that had led to this moment.

Should he have used Circulation?

It would have definitely made a huge difference. The extra power would have been enough to burn through the Inimit’s defences. Even if the two-cored mage had used both affinities from the start of the battle, Kassorith’s additional mana, faster regeneration and overall boost to his senses and magic would have given him a decent chance of winning.

‘No. Hiding it from the Void Hand was the right call. It still is,’ Percy concluded, reaffirming his decision.

Even if it meant losing his only path to a third mana core, he didn’t want to give the alliance such a precious gift. The amount of pain and suffering it could cause at a cosmic scale would be unprecedented.

These weren’t good people. They weren’t necessarily bad people either: not exactly. They just did what they had to do in order to survive and prosper, much like every other faction in the universe. However, those at the bottom were always the ones who paid the price.

Percy would never forget how Nergal had permanently twisted the Ollorians' bodies, how Emah-Nuub: whoever that was: had casted a Decree that relied on perpetual child homelessness, or how the Maradorians couldn't even trust their guests not to butcher their civilians.

Hell, the World Tree would have never ended up splintered into a dozen saplings if not for the greed of the peak factions. How many people: no. How many planets – would suffer if the Void Hand suddenly acquired the power to conquer their rivals?

Besides, revealing his boosting art would inevitably draw a lot of attention to Kassorith. Sure, the Thess'kalan would claim to have personally invented the spell: which would have been a perfectly reasonable explanation under different circumstances: but Percy didn't want an even larger spotlight on them or Lanthaniel.

'Maybe I should have delayed joining the void tournament until Kassorith and I were stronger though.'

The ticket that they had earned from the regional competition hadn't come with an expiration date, so they could have theoretically waited a few decades: or even centuries: to enter.

Then again, joining this early had also been a conscious decision. Percy couldn't afford to let Metatron know that he had advanced twice in just over a decade. The titan was already aware that Percy was a Red-born.

Even jumping from Red to Yellow in such a short time would have been extremely suspicious, let alone from Orange to Green. Perhaps he could claim to have fused with yet another aspect at a higher grade, but it was unclear how much Metatron could discern about the details of his soul.

The only alternative would have been for Percy to postpone his main body's artificial advancement by a few years. However, he understood that he was currently living on borrowed time. Machaon might complete his preparations any day now, and Percy would need all the strength he could get to defeat him.

No matter how he looked at it, there wasn't much that he could have done differently.

He'd delayed the trip for as long as he could, done everything in his power to improve Kassorith's odds, and used all the tools at his disposal to beat opponents that he and his companions had no business facing. Sadly, that simply didn't include everyone.

'It's not the end of the world,' Micky consoled as they slithered into their room. 'Remember that we're not aiming for the top spot in our group. Second place gets the same rewards and qualifies for the elimination phase.'

Percy mentally nodded, though he wasn't entirely convinced. The two-cored Inimit wasn't the only opponent that they were unlikely to beat. The female Denyte appeared to be even stronger, and there was still the two-cored Maradorian.

The good news was that the frog person's second core was only at Green, and they wouldn't have to face him until their sixteenth match. Assuming that they managed to defeat him and everyone else without making another mistake, they might get through the second round with only two losses.

In the worst-case scenario, that would still result in a deficit of two points from second place, but it was somewhat salvageable.

'The way this is going, there are four ways to get our hands on the Decree,' Percy said after a few moments of deliberation, this time making sure to include Kassorith in the conversation.

'If the Inimit loses points to someone else,' the Thess'kalan tentatively offered, pulling a previously chilled bottle of Maradorian ale from his spatial pin and downing its contents with a single gulp.

They'd bought the beverage before the match, knowing that they would probably want it afterwards regardless of the outcome. Percy had hoped to drink it in celebration of an unlikely victory, but its bitter flavour was admittedly a better fit for today's mood.

'That's our first win condition,' Percy agreed, before frowning. 'Unfortunately, it's not something we can control. It's also rather unlikely. I can only see the female Denyte beating him, but that won't mean much if they're both ranked above us and defeat everyone else.'

'So, our best shot is to make up the point difference in the special events,' the Huehuan concluded.

There were two events, with the first taking place right after Kassorith's next match. Ideally, they wanted to rank first in both, though losing to the female Denyte was acceptable as long as they won over the two-cored mages.

Percy didn't mention what the last two solutions were, as he would honestly prefer to not even consider them. If the first special event didn't go his way, he would have to reevaluate the possibility of revealing Circulation. He would probably end up sticking to his original decision, but he wasn't a saint. It was best to avoid even the temptation of compromising his morals and safety like that.

The final option wasn't much better. It was also one that Kassorith wouldn't be very happy with, as it excluded him: though it wasn't like the scaled man would even get a vote.

If Percy and Micky couldn't acquire the Void Decree this year, they could try entering the tournament with a different host. They had previously ruled this out, since returning to Thess'kala or getting someone like Lanthaniel to accompany them was out of the question. However, that was no longer the only way.

Now that they had Oll and Marador Prime marked, they could potentially partner up with a native. Winning a regional tournament or outright buying a ticket wouldn't be that hard, but that would hinge on picking a host that was both capable of making it far into the void tournament, and willing to essentially betray their homeland for an outsider. Even finding a dying elite like that would be difficult, let alone negotiating with them without exposing their secrets.

'Yeah… it seems that we really need to win these special events,' Percy reiterated with certainty as a surge of determination lit his wisp ablaze.

Having made their minds up, Percy and his companions returned to their routine of observing every single match in their group and studying their opponents intently. By now, they probably understood them all well enough to be confident in most of the remaining fights, but they weren't going to start slacking off when they were already walking on such a thin tightrope.

Their ninth match was against the moss-bearded Aflegian that they had watched on the first day of the group phase. The poor guy had lost most of his fights, placing him near the bottom of the rankings.

As much as Percy empathized with the only other participant that hadn't come from a founding faction, he couldn't afford to be charitable. Besides, the Aflegian could always try again next year, which was a luxury that Kassorith exclusively lacked.

The battle itself didn't hold much suspense: the sheer ease by which they won was honestly a breath of fresh air after all the narrow victories they had clenched over the past few months. However, what came after the match was a great deal more stressful.

All eighteen members of their group: even those who had long stopped bothering with fights that didn't concern them: had made their way to the stadium today, standing side by side in the middle of the arena and waiting patiently for the details of the first special event to be announced.

The only sound that reached Kassorith's ears was that of his own heart, pounding like a drum as the crowd went silent. Percy couldn't help but clench his host's reptilian fists, fully aware that the next few moments would determine whether his ambitious mission stood even the slimmest possibility of success.

Chapter 646: Spiralis B-3

A runic circle with a diameter of over a hundred metres lit up in the middle of the arena, slightly offset from the spot where the participants were standing. Kassorith didn't seem to know what he was supposed to do with it, but he joined the others when they decided to walk inside the geometrical shape.

Percy was a little annoyed that the event had been scheduled to begin so soon after their most recent match, as a couple of hours had barely been enough time to recover, and only due to how easily they had defeated their latest opponent.

The poor Aflegian might have not recovered completely though, despite the abundance of healing resources participants were provided with after their fights. Alas, there wasn't much that could be done about that. The moss-bearded man was unlikely to qualify for the next round anyway.

The enchantment shone brightly beneath Kassorith's tail, and then Percy's surroundings shifted in a manner similar to every other time he'd used a teleportation platform. Finding himself in free fall, he quickly wrapped his domain around his host's body to stabilize his descent.

‘Was it too difficult to explain what the special event involves before sending us here?’ Micky asked through their spectral bond, probably not expecting an answer.

Strong, frigid winds assaulted them from every direction, though the lower temperature was more of an annoyance than a genuine threat given the Thess’kalan’s grade and physique. The relative lack of oxygen was far more troublesome as it made the scaled man lightheaded, yet there was enough that he wouldn’t suffocate anytime soon. They were obviously located quite far from the ground, so the air would likely not be as thin when they landed.

Percy’s Sage’s Pond unfolded in every direction, though he failed to find anything solid within his range. Kassorith had clearly been separated from the other contestants during the teleportation. For now, Percy had no choice but to scan the area with his regular eyesight.

‘It looks like we’ve been sent to a different planet,’ he concluded after a cursory examination.

Gone was the impressive patchwork of green continents and deep blue oceans that he’d learned to associate with Marador Prime, replaced by a world that didn’t seem to contain nearly as much water.

There was only a single landmass that spanned the entire globe: or at least as much of the planet as Percy could see from his current vantage point. The ground sported an atypical golden colour, though Percy was unable to tell if it consisted of actual gold dust, regular sand, or something else entirely from this distance.

A series of long, wide rivers flowed across the planet’s surface. However, they weren’t arranged randomly. There appeared to only be about a dozen watery lines that spiralled around the entire globe, converging toward a huge ring-shaped river near the equator.

Percy didn’t know whether there was an actual ocean or another circular body of water on the other side, but he doubted that he’d have enough time to circumnavigate the planet anyway, so it didn’t really matter.

The cyclical river was even thicker than its offshoots, surrounding a central patch of land large enough to easily house an entire nation or two, making the whole planet resemble one massive eyeball. Percy found the geography somewhat unsettling, thinking for a moment that the world itself was staring right

at his host. On closer inspection, he realized that Kassorith was hovering over the outskirts of the circular plane: not its centre.

Either way, Percy forced himself to calm down, knowing that this was all just a part of the event.

“Welcome to Spiralis B-3,” the cold, automatic voice from the arena said. Its volume had been amplified dozens of times, probably to ensure that the participants heard it even if they’d ventured far from its source.

Speaking of that, Kassorith lifted his gaze, spotting a metallic disk that was wider than a person was tall, hovering a couple of kilometres above his head. Clearly, it was where the teleportation had spat him out, and also where the voice was coming from, though their omnidirectional vision hadn’t unfolded fast enough to locate it earlier.

“This is a barren world that has been under the Void Hand’s control for a very long time. As you have probably deduced, this is going to be the location of the fifth group’s first special event,” the voice continued, oblivious to anyone’s thoughts. “Up until this point, we have only evaluated your strength under conditions of single combat. While a mage’s might is admittedly an extremely important quality, it is not the only one that our alliance values.”

‘Thank goodness for that.’ Percy couldn’t help but exhale in relief, fully aware that he and his host had already fallen somewhat short in that department. Perking up, he waited with bated breath for the details of the assignment.

“You will find countless Green beasts scattered across the surface of the planet, carefully bred for this year’s competition. The creatures are not inherently special, but you are to treat them as if they were. For the purposes of this test, you should imagine that every species on Spiralis B-3 is capable of producing some invaluable resource, such as a form of stable beast mana that is suitable for core-cleansing.

“More importantly, we have allowed a mild demonic infestation to propagate across the planet. It is not powerful enough to directly influence Blue sapients such as yourselves: at least not merely by being here: but the unintelligent Green wildlife is a different story. Keep in mind that you will encounter circumstances during the event that will render you more susceptible to corruption, though any lingering influence will be cleansed from your bodies and minds upon its conclusion. The infestation falls within the dominion of Wrath, so expect every creature to attack on sight, regardless of how suicidal that choice may be.”

Percy gasped in awe of the alliance's means. Leaving aside how unsettling it was to be deliberately sent to an infected world, he understood that the Void Hand wasn't going to allow any real danger to befall their elites.

He was honestly quite impressed by the lengths the alliance had gone to, just for the sake of a limited competition. Judging from the relative scarcity of water and complete absence of flora on the planet, its ecosystem shouldn't be able to support many Green beasts by itself.

In other words, the organizers had artificially created this environment either by importing countless creatures from other worlds, or enough resources to feed those already here. It reminded Percy of the Thirsty Valley, though the sheer size and scope of Spiralis B-3 was incomparable to Kronos' Decree.

'That still doesn't tell us what we're supposed to do,' Micky complained again, focusing more on the competition itself than the environment.

As if on cue, the amethyst emblem pinned on Kassorith's tunic began flashing rhythmically, indicating that it would play some important role in the upcoming contest. The emotionless voice spoke again, soon confirming Percy's assumptions.

"You are advised to keep your badges on your person at all times. You will not be disqualified directly if you lose them, but it will be difficult to award you the points you have earned if you are not under surveillance, potentially leading to a lower final score than expected. It will also be harder to extract you from the planet in case you find yourselves in mortal danger.

"Your objective is to cleanse Spiralis B-3 of its infestation in any way you deem appropriate. The exact manner in which you choose to contribute is up to you, but a variable amount of points will be awarded depending on how effective your actions are."

"Interesting," Percy muttered.

He still wasn't sure if he and his host would do well enough in this event to reach their goals, but he didn't exactly mind an opportunity to learn more about demonic infestations.

Even if he failed to acquire the Void Decree in the end, this would be valuable knowledge for his future travels. He'd already encountered three different infestations, and he'd been mostly powerless against each of them. This wouldn't do if he ever wanted to help Marnok or all the other innocent people suffering from the cosmic cancers.

The cold voice wasn't done, however.

"Directly attacking other participants will result in immediate disqualification, but subtler forms of sabotage are allowed. Do note, however, that assisting or inhibiting other contestants may be rewarded or penalized, depending on what broader impact your actions have on the planet's purification. The event will last for two Maradorian days and nights, after which you will be extracted back to the stadium. May you compete with honour and diligence."

With the conclusion of the instructions, the amethyst badge projected a small screen about a metre away from Kassorith's chest, listing eighteen names alongside their current scores.

Based on what Percy could tell about the Void Hand's language: due to his connection to Kassorith: the participants were listed in alphabetical order, though he guessed that that was temporary. They were all currently tied at first place with zero points, but that would probably change as soon as the contestants landed and began interacting with the infected fauna.

'I suppose this is a separate ranking unique to the special event,' the Thess'kalan said. 'We'll probably receive a certain number of points in the main ranking depending on our performance here.'

'Indeed,' Percy agreed with a mental nod. 'Come on then; clock's already ticking. Let's figure out how to win this thing.'

Chapter 647: Hunting infected beasts

While Kassorith approached the surface of Spiralis B-3, Percy debated internally whether to get this place marked.

On one hand, he had previously decided to mark as many of the Void Hand's worlds as he could, regardless of their importance. On the other hand, he hadn't expected to end up on a barren patch of dirt that the alliance only used as a battleground in their tournaments.

Percy's main body was currently busy with his own project, so bothering him for something relatively unimportant wasn't ideal. After momentary deliberation, the clone decided to spare his counterparts the effort. Even if they marked the strange planet, they were unlikely to ever return here. They would probably just get rid of the mark later, once they registered enough locations to start straining their minds.

Percy's disappointment rose slightly when his host finally landed on the surface and confirmed that the whole planet was covered in a desert of gold powder. While Percy rarely used mundane coins nowadays: or any currency for that matter: he keenly remembered that three gold coins could buy him a dose of elixir back home.

Having access to more cleansing resources than he would ever need, he didn't care for a small quantity of shiny metal, yet he understood that there was enough wealth scattered across Spiralis B-3 to buy everything with monetary value on Remior a thousand times over.

'It's such a pity to leave it behind…' He sighed.

Sadly, it couldn't be helped. It still wasn't worth interrupting his main body just to collect magicless materials, and Percy couldn't risk storing any of the metallic dust into his spatial seal under the alliance's surveillance. Besides, gold was only valuable on Remior due to its scarcity. If he brought too much back, its price would quickly fall off a cliff.

Shifting his attention to more pressing matters, he focused on the nearest beast that he and his host had spotted on the way down. It looked like some kind of giant fox, though its thick, dark fur looked entirely out of place in the middle of a desert, indicating that the creature had been imported from a different planet.

The alien beast had noticed Kassorith too, so it was already dashing towards the Thess'kalan with a crazed glint in its slit pupils.

'Wow, the voice wasn't lying about their aggression,' Micky mused. 'This thing looks like it would eat its own mother for glancing at it the wrong way!'

Percy mentally nodded, putting the fox out of its misery by cleaving its head off with a sharp wave of Violet-grade willpower the moment it stepped close enough. The creature's momentum carried it right through a steep dune. It continued to slide for several metres after that, carving a deep trench through the sand before stopping near Kassorith.

A fountain of blood gushed from the stump, darkening a patch of ground as it seeped into the pale powder. The Thess'kalan had to shield himself with a layer of willpower to avoid getting drenched.

Most curiously, wisps of dark smoke spilled out of the wound. They flowed against the wind, traveling straight towards the Thess'kalan. Whatever the strange gas was, it luckily dissipated into nothing before it touched Kassorith's scales.

Percy didn't rush to fly in search of their next target, opting to check his host's score first. He needed to understand how to amass points as efficiently as possible before scaling his tactics up. The list already looked very different than it had mere seconds ago:

'Zurvanai: 3 points,

Remlat: 2 points,

Azalotheen: 2 points,

…

Kassorith: 1 point,

Gehitti: 1 point,

…

Elamon: 0 points,

Bereth: 0 points.'

'Okay. The good news is that killing the beast increased our score,' Percy confirmed with a relieved sigh.

He'd been worried that they would be penalized for their actions, since the mechanical voice had instructed them to treat the creatures as if they were inherently valuable. However, it appeared like it was still preferable to eliminate the infected beasts than to let them be.

'The bad news is that the others are already getting busy,' Kassorith replied. Zurvanai was the female Denyte with the time affinity, and Remlat was the two-cored Inimit who had defeated them a few weeks prior. Both had already clawed their way to the top of the list, which clearly didn't bode well. 'Should we go on a massive killing spree and hope that we can slaughter the beasts faster than anybody else?'

'No,' Percy said with a mental shake of his head. 'Let's be smart. I doubt that we can compete with them in sheer killing speed, so we would be dooming ourselves if we did that. We have two full days until the end of the event. Losing a few minutes: or even hours: to settle on a more optimal approach isn't a bad idea.'

'What did you have in mind?' the Thess'kalan asked. As unhappy as he sounded, he didn't attempt to refute Percy's words.

'The organizers wouldn't have gone through all of this trouble for a simple hunting contest. They could have just asked us to destroy a few machines on Marador Prime. There has to be a more efficient way to earn points,' Percy explained. 'For now, how about you and Micky kill a few more beasts to see if there are any hidden rules that we aren't aware of? I'll take that time to tinker with an idea of mine.'

Percy's companions grunted in agreement through their connection, taking off toward the middle of the circular zone. It didn't take them long to spot more beasts, some of them fighting each other while the rest were by themselves.

Micky easily butchered them with his willpower just like Percy had previously done, while Kassorith had to resort to sharp longswords he fashioned out of metal mana since his domain wasn't as powerful.

Whenever a creature fell, they checked their score to confirm that it was worth exactly one point, regardless of its size or species. In other words, if there was another way to raise their score, it probably had nothing to do with targeting specific creatures.

Another thing that they noticed was that killing a beast appeared to do something to them. Nothing too obvious had happened after the first dozen creatures or so, but Percy and Micky eventually heard something akin to an ominous voice whispering in their ears.

At first, they chalked it up to the planet's somewhat thinner oxygen getting to them, since their host hadn't felt anything strange. However, Kassorith reported hearing similar sounds after amassing a few more kills of his own.

Apparently, the feeling had only been delayed in the Thess'kalan's case because Micky had slaughtered a greater proportion of beasts. Percy hadn't participated in the hunt at all, but he technically shared a mind and soul with the Huehuan even if their memories were currently partitioned.

The mysterious voice was muted initially, so they didn't pay it much attention. After crossing the fifty-point mark, however, the noise grew more pervasive. It didn't speak any language they recognized. In fact, they weren't sure that it had uttered any coherent words at all, but rather a bunch of animalistic growls.

Even so, the whispers caused their heart to beat faster and their blood to boil. All of a sudden, Percy itched to join his companions in slaughtering the creatures. How dare a bunch of Green vermin plucked from Phoebe-knew where think that it was a good idea to attack a Blue?

Guessing that the black smoke spilling out of the beasts' wounds was responsible for infecting Kassorith, Percy advised the others to keep their distance from the creatures while killing them, hoping that this would lessen the side-effects. Unfortunately, the negative thoughts appeared to accumulate at the same rate as before.

'Stay out of my way!' Kassorith lashed out at Micky as the Huehuan tried to behead a long-necked crocodile. 'Didn't you finish the last three off? How about leaving some for me?'

'Don't blame me for your lack of skill,' Micky snarkily snapped back. 'If you want to kill them, try attacking faster than me.'

A part of Percy wanted to diffuse the tension between his spectral companions. Did it really matter who got the kill? Their points all ended up in the same place, didn't they?

Another part of him, however, felt utmost disgust at the way the treacherous snake had talked to his friend. Who the fuck did he think he was? The scaled bastard should have died years ago, when he double-crossed Percy. How dare he make demands of anyone?!

Percy suppressed these thoughts. His negative opinion of Kassorith wasn't exactly a secret, but it was clear that they were all under some external influence. The Void Hand's system had warned them that they could succumb to the infestation under certain conditions.

'Stop. Both of you. Let's take a break from killing beasts for a few minutes,' he told the others.

Two waves of protest bubbled up through their connection, though Kassorith and Micky both held themselves back in the end. Everyone was smart enough to acknowledge the wisdom in Percy's words.

Fortunately, the sinister whispers appeared to calm down as they rested. Ten minutes later, Percy felt like they could probably resume their hunt, though he wanted to wait a little longer to study the rate by which the ominous feeling faded.

He had noticed that the accumulated rage had dissipated faster at the beginning. The weaker the whispers grew, the more slowly his mind seemed to purge them.

'Interesting… So, we're incentivized to push ourselves as far as we can before pausing. It's more efficient to kill, say, a hundred beasts followed by a ten-minute break, than it is to take a five-minute break every fifty kills.'

This level of negative influence shouldn't be enough to severely affect even a regular Blue: let alone the elite participants of the void tournament. However, Percy could absolutely see the corruption becoming an issue if they accumulated five: or maybe ten times: as many kills without stopping.

In that kind of mental state, it wouldn't be hard to imagine a contestant getting carried away and attacking another, only to end up disqualified from the event.

Percy and Kassorith hadn't run into others yet, but Blues could cover a lot of ground, and there were eighteen of them scattered around Spiralis B-3, so they were bound to see some in the next two days.

Would a mage that was already on edge manage to resist the urge to strike their rival if they happened to snatch their kill? What if it was also an opponent who had previously defeated them in the tournament, thus causing them to harbour a grudge?

'We already have a small advantage due to Micky and Kassorith splitting the negative influence in half, but I bet this won't be enough to get us to the top,' Percy concluded.

It was finally time to put the fancy purification runes that he had bought from Metatron years ago to the test.

Chapter 648: Purification runes

Percy hadn't used his purification runes yet. He had mastered them about a decade ago, though he had never found an opportunity to test them, so he'd decided to spend some time figuring out how to work them into his new enchantments as efficiently as possible.

He'd also wanted to let Micky and Kassorith hunt a few beasts without the runes, so that he would have a point of comparison. Still, it was time to get serious, otherwise the distance to their rivals would only widen.

Pulling up the list again, Percy quickly checked everyone's scores.

'Falanor: 456 points,

Zurvanai: 311 points,

Remlat: 209 points,

Azalotheen: 198 points,

…

Kassorith: 131 points,

…’

Kassorith was already down to the fourteenth place, which was slightly worrying. However, Percy understood that this was simply due to his host’s recent break. They’d honestly been a little too cautious to pause this early, as he doubted that anyone would genuinely need to take a break before reaching five hundred points or so.

The current rankings were clearly skewed in favour of those capable of slaughtering the infected beasts the fastest. Once everyone approached their limits, they would need to take frequent breaks to cleanse the corruption. At that time, those with an advantage in resisting or purging negative thoughts: like Percy and his host: would begin to climb.

‘Hmmm… Zurvanai, Remlat, and Azalotheen are the favourites in our group. I’m not too surprised that they’ve hogged most of the top spots already,’ Kassorith noted. ‘How the hell did Falanor pass everyone though?’

It was indeed strange. Falanor was a male Ollorian with a light affinity that Kassorith had defeated during his sixth match. The deformed man wasn’t weak by any stretch of the imagination, but he definitely wasn’t strong or fast enough to dominate the whole event.

‘Huh, I told you that the strange colour of his mana had to be from a blessing,’ Percy said. ‘It must be one of those that Metatron mentioned: the concepts that are effective against demonic infestations.’

Falanor’s mana sported a different hue from that of other light affinity users that Percy had met in the past. However, his spells weren’t any faster, stronger, brighter, or hotter than they were supposed to be, so Percy and his companions had debated whether the strange colour had been caused by a Decree or something else.

Evidently not.

The fact that the Ollorian had comfortably jumped to the top spot could only mean that he had discovered a more effective method of earning points. That likely pointed towards a way of cleansing the creatures without killing them.

‘Alright, let’s give the enchantments a shot. Maybe we can achieve something similar,’ Kassorith suggested, clearly being on the same page as Percy.

They started by forging a thin set of armour and including lots of thrice-amplified purification runes in every unit cell. This wouldn’t help them cleanse the beasts or accumulate points faster, but Percy hoped that the enchantments would offer them some resistance against negative thoughts, allowing them to keep hunting for longer.

While Micky and Kassorith scoured the golden dunes in search of new prey, Percy spent some time forging one of the metallic disks that they used to fire their signature attack, making sure to incorporate the purification runes in the formation.

Once the tool was ready, he asked his companions to take turns firing the crimson beam at the local fauna while he carefully studied the outcome with his Sage’s Pond.

At full power, the scorching spell was nearly strong enough to threaten Seventh Circle mages, so the Fourth Circle creatures never stood a chance. Percy and the others inadvertently torched way too many unlucky beasts before figuring out the correct input to avoid instantly burning the poor things to a crisp.

Unfortunately, their efforts didn’t yield the results they were hoping for.

The creatures squirmed in agony under the light of the formation, the blistering heat ripping open their skin and melting their flesh. The strange black smoke that Percy had mentally associated with the infestation gushed out of the animals’ bodies in greater volumes, indicating that the purification runes were doing something, yet Kassorith’s score never increased more than it was supposed to.

While the beasts remained alive, the Void Hand's system refused to reward the Thess'kalan with any points. The moment the creatures succumbed to their grievous wounds, Kassorith was only granted a single point for the kill like before.

The corruption appeared to cling to the beast's bodies far more deeply than expected. While the enchantment definitely seemed to purge the negative influence, the creatures never managed to endure the damage long enough to be fully cleansed.

Percy tried to lower the intensity of the beams further, but that only caused the rate by which the black smoke was being expelled to drop steeply. Evidently, the effectiveness of the purification runes was directly tied to the strength of the attack, so untangling the two effects wouldn't be easy.

'Now what?' Micky asked. 'Maybe we can get rid of the negative influence if we cook each beast slowly under a weaker beam, but I'm not sure it'll be worth the time. We might be better off just killing as many as we can.'

Before making his mind up, Percy pulled up the list once again to gauge his host's position in the rankings. Eight hours had already passed since the start of the competition, so the list had undergone massive changes.

'Falanor: 3444 points,

Zurvanai: 1890 points,

Remlat: 1503 points,

Tereth: 1343 points,

Semleni: 1321 points,

Kassorith: 1151 points,

Ganni: 1130 points,

Azalotheen: 1099 points,

…'

There was a lot to unpack there. Azalotheen: the two-cored Maradorian that Percy was wary of: had thankfully fallen off, as had most other participants who lacked the means to resist the corruption. In fact, the frog-person had even fallen behind Ganni: his fellow Maradorian with a metal affinity that Kassorith had defeated during his second fight in the group phase.

'I guess that Ganni must also be engraving his constructs with purification runes,' Percy thought.

Nobody else had attempted to use runecrafting in their fights, since enchanting one's mana in real time was extremely impractical without the Scribing trait. However, that didn't mean that Percy and his companions were the only ones in the tournament who were skilled in the art.

It was a lot easier to use runes during the event, as everyone had more time to prepare their constructs. The good news was that Ganni's runecrafting language was probably inferior to the Vault's magiscript, so Percy didn't feel very threatened by him.

The same should be true of the three Inimits that were currently above Kassorith in the rankings: Remlat, Tereth, and Semleni. The winged mages had probably applied an effect similar to Percy's purification runes on their feathers to resist the corruption, though all three had also shown signs of slowing down.

Passing Tereth and Semleni shouldn't be too difficult, though Remlat was still up in the air: which was actually a problem because defeating the two-cored mage was Percy's most important goal.

'I still don't get how the two at the top are so far ahead.' Micky groaned. 'Sure, Falanor probably has the perfect blessing for this contest, but Zurvanai shouldn't have anything but sheer killing speed.'

Percy couldn't help but crease his brow. It was true that nobody understood the full extent of the female Denyte's abilities, since the prodigious woman had yet to be pushed to her limit. Even so, nothing that he did know about her should have allowed her to resist the corruption.

'Maybe she accelerates time around her body to get rid of the negative thoughts faster?' he tentatively offered. 'She did seem to take a couple of breaks earlier, though they were scarcer and shorter than everyone else's. Either way, it doesn't matter right now. Our priority is to beat Remlat, and our current approach clearly isn't good enough.'

Through the combination of the potent purification runes on their armour and splitting the corruption between multiple minds, Percy and Kassorith were accumulating negative thoughts far more slowly than before.

While they wouldn't be able to keep slaughtering beasts indefinitely, they should be fine until the end of the competition. Meanwhile, most of their rivals would have to pause at some point: the three Inimits included.

The only ones who wouldn't be affected were Falanor: who appeared completely immune to corruption: and Zurvanai: who was so far ahead from everyone else that it was unlikely they would catch up.

In any case, it was unclear whether Percy and his host would make it to third place. No… even that might not be enough. They still had no idea how many points the special event would grant them, so passing Remlat by a single rank might not be enough to close the gap in the main competition.

Beating Falanor was probably a lost cause, but Percy ideally wanted his host to pass Zurvanai as well and finish in second place. And he wasn't going to leave that up to chance.

'I need to figure out a way to cleanse the beasts without killing them, or we can kiss the Void Decree goodbye.'

Chapter 649: Questionable modifications

Running out of options, Percy decided to ignore many rules that he had learned in his capacity as an enchanter, modifying his formation in all sorts of ways that were generally inadvisable.

He was already using multiple methods to maximize the potency of his runes, such as concatenating his enchantments in three layers and incorporating amplification runes in his unit cells. Each of these techniques operated on different principles and worked independently of one another, allowing them to be combined for even better results.

The art of runecrafting was commonly likened to whispering in the ears of the universe and beseeching the world itself to temporarily bend its rules in one's favour. In that analogy, employing a more advanced runecrafting language such as the Vault's magiscript was like speaking more clearly, using amplification runes was the equivalent of shouting instead of whispering, and repeating an enchantment through multiple unit cells or formations was akin to having a crowd of people talking at the same time.

The problem was that there was a limit to how much benefit could be extracted from each method before running into diminishing returns.

Including too many amplification runes in a unit cell meant lowering the ratio of other runes. After crossing a certain threshold: which varied depending on the enchantment in question: amplification runes began to hurt more than they helped.

When it came to adding more layers to a formation, it typically wasn't worth going past three. Including a fourth wouldn't weaken the enchantment per se, but the benefits would be marginal and come at too great a cost. Each new layer increased the space, material, and effort required to construct the formation, as well as the minimum amount of mana needed to fuel it.

Percy stopped caring about all of that.

He and his companions were already proficient enough with their Masterful spell to fit a three-layered formation on a disk no wider than Kassorith's chest. It wouldn't take more than a few minutes to create enough copies of the metallic construct and arrange them into a pseudo-enchantment about as large as a house, thus adding a fourth layer to the construct.

The resulting enchantment would be too troublesome and bulky to use in an actual fight, and the effect would barely be any better than simply scaling the three-layered version up, but that was fine. The rules of the event gave them plenty of time to waste, and they needed to squeeze out every drop of cleansing power they could get from their runes.

Percy also added more amplification runes, fully aware that they would start to eat away at the potency of his purification runes. To counteract that, he included more purification runes as well, lowering the ratio of self-repairs, structural integrity enchantments, heating and lightning resonance runes.

Sacrificing so many of the formation's key components would cause its overall efficiency to plummet, massively lowering the damage that the crimson beams would be capable of.

This was an acceptable price, since the enchantment was already nearly three grades more destructive than it needed to be to slaughter the Green beasts on Spiralis B-3. Percy and Kassorith had been feeding their formations with less than four percent of the mana they could support. The modifications would drastically lower the output and raise the input, but there was still plenty of leeway in that department.

The greatest change happened in the top-most two layers of the formation, however. In the previous version of the structure, Percy had only included the complete unit cells in the two bottom layers: the texture of the metal and the interlocked pieces of steel: but not the top layer which had consisted of only a single heating rune.

This time, Percy had changed both the third and fourth layers into pseudo-enchantments that combined heating and purification runes, thus further skewing the overall effect of the formation toward the latter.

The new construct ended up requiring a lot more fine-tuning than Percy would have liked, but it was ready about an hour later.

It took the form of a metallic abomination that would be an absolute pain in the ass to carry around the gold-specked desert. Unlike before, activating the runes would probably drain Kassorith's mana reserves significantly, and the crimson glow they released was unlikely to put a scratch on even a Sixth Circle mage: let alone a Seventh.

'It doesn't matter,' Percy reassured his companions. 'It's not like this event is particularly taxing on our core anyway. As long as the formation gets the job done, we should be able to keep using it for a couple of days.'

Knowing that Kassorith had probably slid even further down the rankings over the past hour, Percy was too scared to pull up the list. His current priority was to ensure that the new formation worked. If it did, closing the gap to those at the top would be trivial.

If it didn't… well… it wouldn't be too late to resume killing the beasts. Less than a quarter of the allotted time had elapsed, so there was still a slim chance of them passing Remlat: though Zurvanai would be out of the question.

Kassorith and Micky took off in search of their next target while helping Percy drag the giant web of engraved metal. Unfortunately, the burden halved their traveling speed: which wasn't ideal: and the density of Green beasts in the central region also appeared to have decreased during their break.

They'd already spotted countless carcasses in various states while hunting earlier: some of them burnt to a crisp, others crushed to a pulp or sliced into pieces: left by their rivals. They'd even caught sight of other participants every now and then, though nobody had seemed interested in interfering with Kassorith at the time.

It was obvious that most: if not all: of the competitors had spent the first quarter of the event scouring the central region, either because they'd all been dropped here, or because they'd deemed the circular plane to house the highest concentration of prey.

Sadly, staying here was growing less viable by the minute.

It was admittedly a large area, but Blues could cover a lot of ground in ten or so hours, and there had been as many as eighteen of them: all of them elites: competing in the same region. They'd probably slaughtered over eighty percent of the creatures by now, and that number would only go up until there was nothing left.

'I suppose the organizers expect us to branch out into the spiralling strips of land at some point,' Kassorith said.

Percy was about to voice his agreement when he caught sight of a live beast by the westernmost edge of his Sage's Pond. Darting toward his prey: or at least flying towards it as fast as he could while dragging the colossal chunk of steel behind him: he hoped that the creature wouldn't get stolen by a rival mage before he had a chance to test the new formation.

Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any other Blues in Kassorith's immediate vicinity.

Upon reaching the unfortunate beast: a creature akin to a scaled gorilla: Percy pinched it in place with his willpower, moving the metallic formation right over it. Kassorith promptly poured enough lightning mana into the runes to activate all four layers one after the other, directing the ominous red light onto the struggling animal.

Using his formation on the creatures made Percy feel like a child burning ants alive with a magnifying glass, which he didn't enjoy. However, he reminded himself that he was dealing with infected beasts that were better off purified or dead than left alone in this state.

Wisps of black smoke gushed out of the gorilla's blistering flesh about twice as fast as they did before, which was somewhat promising.

'It eats up ten times as much mana though…' Percy noted with a bitter smile.

In any case, it would be worth the cost if it allowed him to cleanse the creature in a reasonable timeframe. Or well… that would also depend on how many points the action rewarded Kassorith with, but judging by Falanor's insane lead, it was bound to be plenty.

Enduring the drain on his host's reserves, Percy watched with bated breath as the formation continued to purge the beast's negative thoughts. Thirty seconds later, he had to lower the intensity of the beam, since the animal looked like it was about to die despite the enchantment having been designed for purification over damage.

In the end, the creature drew its last breath after being subjected to the crimson light for a bit under a minute. Unfortunately, it still hadn't been fully cleansed, awarding the Thess'kalan with only a single point, though Percy wasn't too disappointed.

'Is it me, or was the black smoke several times thinner during the last few seconds?' Micky asked.

'I think so too,' Kassorith confirmed.

They were close. Percy could practically taste success. They just had to slow down the cleansing process slightly, but it seemed to just be a question of minor tweaks now. Of course, they needed to find another test subject first, which was going to be a hassle.

After wasting another ten minutes flying over the golden graveyard, Percy grew surer than ever that they would have to switch to a new hunting area, though he did eventually spot a giant flightless bird that he was tempted to describe as a four-legged ostrich.

Jumping at the opportunity to test the formation out again, he was much more cautious this time, halving the intensity of the beam from the very start. After around seventy seconds of getting cooked under the crimson light, the dark smoke emanating from the bird thinned once more.

Thankfully, the creature was in a much better state than the gorilla, so it was able to endure for another twenty seconds, until the final black wisp evaporated under Percy's relieved gaze.

The poor ostrich was badly sunburnt, its feathers having either fallen off or burnt to ashes. It breathed heavily, halfway submerged in a puddle of molten gold, looking like it was unlikely to survive the next few hours. Still, it was alive for now, and that was hopefully all that mattered for the event.

Summoning the courage to check the list again, Percy's borrowed eyes instantly homed into his host's score, the corner of his equally-borrowed lips curling up.

It had gone up by ten points!

Chapter 650: Clawing up the rankings

In theory, Percy and his host could earn points ten times faster by cleansing the beasts than outright killing them. In practice, dragging the metallic construct around and having to slowly subject each creature to the purifying beam for over a minute would greatly bog them down, so they'd only be twice or thrice as fast as before.

'It's good enough. We can probably compete for the top ranks like this, though we need to find a new hunting spot first,' he thought.

Flying toward the northwestern edge of the circular landmass, Kassorith crossed the ring-shaped river to enter one of the twelve strips of desert spiralling outwards. Percy wasn't happy that they had to waste time relocating, but they would have honestly needed to do so even if their previous hunting grounds hadn't been cleaned up by their rivals.

Nobody had cared much about Kassorith earlier, as he'd never climbed higher than the sixth spot in the event, and his hunting approach hadn't stood out in any way. Things were bound to change over the next day or so.

Once the Thess'kalan started rising through the list, he was going to catch a lot of attention. It would be easy for his rivals to figure out how he had accomplished that or how they could stop him.

Percy was most worried about Remlat, whose participation in the elimination phase of the tournament would be directly threatened by Kassorith's ascension. If the two-cored Inimit realized that the Thess'kalan was on course to overtake him, he might switch tactics, opting to obstruct him than compete fairly. Destroying the bulky formation or slaughtering Kassorith's targets before the crimson beam managed to cleanse them wouldn't be too difficult.

In light of that, Percy felt that isolating themselves from other participants wasn't a bad idea. Sadly, it didn't take long for him and his spectral companions to run into another problem.

'Everything here is dead too,' Micky said as their host's features twisted into a grimace. 'They must have beaten us to this direction as well.'

It had been over ten minutes since they crossed into the new patch of golden sand, yet they hadn't seen even a single live beast: only carcasses of creatures that had clearly been slain by powerful spells rather than claws or fangs.

'It must've been a while since the others decided to abandon the central region,' Percy guessed. 'It probably happened while we were preparing the formation. If I'm not mistaken, we might have even been the last ones to leave.'

'Should we try the next region?' Kassorith asked.

Percy mentally shrugged, steering the greatsword by ninety degrees to the left and shooting toward the neighbouring strip of land with the giant formation in tow.

Reaching and scanning the new area took another fifteen minutes, and the results weren't any better. Not giving up, Percy and his companions decided to try one final time, though the third patch of golden dust appeared no less ravaged than the last two.

'Damn,' Kassorith cursed. 'Don't tell me we wasted all of that time perfecting the enchantments only to end up with nothing to use them on.'

Percy massaged his host's temples as he considered their next move. 'Things might not be that bad. It might take a while, but we should eventually stumble upon some live beasts if we stick with this region.'

With eighteen contestants and only twelve paths, it was a given that Kassorith would have ended up in this situation after losing the head-start. However, the problem was only temporary.

The spiralling strips of desert were far narrower where they bordered the circular landmass, their width barely reaching a hundred kilometres across. If the participants who had picked this direction had wanted to discourage others from following them, slaughtering every creature near the beginning of the zone was a no-brainer.

Fortunately, these areas spanned the entire planet. They should be dozens of times wider about halfway around the globe. There was no way a couple of Blues could eliminate every single beast in such a colossal region, so it would only be a matter of time until they gave up and stuck to their own narrow lanes.

Left with no other option, Percy and his companions pressed onwards, scouring the land for surviving animals. Judging by the relative scarcity of the carcasses, the density of beasts should have been lower than it had been in the central region even before the contestants had started massacring them.

Finding the first target took over half an hour, though Percy and Kassorith managed to cleanse three more in the following thirty minutes. By the end of the second hour, they stopped finding carcasses entirely, indicating that they had probably diverged enough from the paths of their predecessors.

Free to hunt to their heart's content at last, they averaged about twenty beasts per hour: about half of what they would have found in the central region near the start of the event, or an eighth if they had killed instead of cleansing them.

Leaving aside all of the time they had lost, two hundred points per hour was honestly a good pace, and they still had plenty of time to make it count. After settling into their new routine, Percy finally took a moment to pull up the scoreboard again, eager to check how far behind Kassorith had fallen.

'Falanor: 3901 points,

Zurvanai: 2224 points,

Remlat: 1688 points,

Semleni: 1557 points,

Tereth: 1533 points,

…

Kassorith: 1321 points,

…'

'Okay… this is salvageable,' Percy concluded after performing some mental calculations.

Preparing the formation and finding a new place to hunt had cost him and his companions about three hours. Their rivals had obviously kept themselves busy during that time, causing Kassorith to drop by another handful of ranks, all the way to tenth place.

But it wasn't as bad as Percy had feared.

Everyone had been affected by the lower density of beasts outside the central region, and Falanor was probably the only person besides Kassorith who hadn't accumulated any negative influence from his targets. Cleansing the creatures rather than killing them wasn't corruptive, and even if it had been, the man would have resisted the dark smoke just fine with his blessing.

The other participants, on the other hand, had clearly been forced to take a few breaks, which had slowed them down significantly. Better still, Kassorith should have around twenty-nine hours left to catch up, which was plenty given his current speed.

Happy with his assessment, Percy concentrated on the hunt, cleansing one beast after another and hoping that it would be enough.

It wasn't easy.

Dragging the heavy construct around was tiresome, and the inefficient runes on the formation placed a much greater strain on Kassorith's reserves than before, forcing him to keep replenishing his mana between targets.

Even the act of cleansing the beasts was a struggle, as Percy and his host had to carefully monitor the inputs and outputs of their enchantments, as well as the condition of their targets, lest they killed the creatures by accident or wasted too long purifying them.

All things considered, maintaining their current pace forced them to exert themselves physically, magically, and mentally for hours without end. The trio managed to get around that by rotating tasks between themselves.

Initially, Percy was in charge of dragging the formation around and restoring their reserves, Micky was the one pinning the beasts down and paying attention to their condition, and Kassorith was operating the enchantments. Whenever they grew sick of those tasks, they switched things up, allowing them to persist.

At some point, the sky grew dark.

Percy was momentarily taken aback by the change, having almost forgotten that Spiralis B-3 was technically just a regular planet orbiting its own star. Without realizing, he had started thinking of this place as an artificial environment that was not subjected to things like the weather or a day-night cycle.

In any case, he didn't even bother trying to calculate how long a day was on this planet. The data was too warped by the insane geographical distance that he and his host had traversed since the beginning of the competition, as well as the disorienting path that they had taken through the spiralling strip of land.

While he didn't have an accurate way of measuring time either, he estimated that another fifteen hours should have elapsed since he last checked the rankings. He and his companions had cleansed hundreds of beasts during that time, so he hoped that they had finally closed the gap to the top.

Pushing aside the disturbing imagery of frothing maws and agonized expressions that would surely haunt him for years to come, Percy pulled up the list once more, eager to check up on his opponents.

'Falanor: 6327 points,

Kassorith: 4207 points,

Zurvanai: 4100 points,

Remlat: 2755 points,

Semleni: 2432 points,

…'

'Finally!' he exclaimed in relief.

Falanor was still solidly above Kassorith, but they had actually managed to overtake even Zurvanai: let alone Remlat. Percy still wasn't sure how their performance in the special event would be rewarded, but

he felt that they should be granted at least a couple of points more than the Inimit, thus making up for their previous loss at the bird-person's hands.

Azalotheen: the two-cored Maradorian: had fallen even further behind, meaning that Percy and Kassorith might not have to worry about him even if he defeated them later on in the tournament.

Of course, losing to the frog-person might cause them to fall behind Remlat again, so they'd have to do their best to avoid that. There would also be another special event at the end of the group phase, which could easily shuffle the scoreboard once more.

'Let's not get complacent,' Micky warned. 'This event isn't over yet. We have to keep going at the same pace if we don't want Zurvanai to pass us again.'

Kassorith mentally nodded, flying toward a hairy bat that had just entered the range of their senses.

'Do you guys want to switch things up one last time?' Percy suddenly asked, taking his companions by surprise.

'What do you mean?' the Thess'kalan asked back.

'Well… I've been playing with an idea for a while. I don't know if it'll work, but we still have over a dozen hours left before the end of the event. It's going to be close, but we might be able to catch up to Falanor too if this works.'