Wanderer 651

Chapter 651: Puppets

Percy had no idea whether his plan would work, but he saw no reason not to try. He and his host had practically secured second place: it would be really difficult for Zurvanai to surpass them again: so at worst they would be wasting their time.

Since they intended to use both Kassorith's bloodline and spiritual blood, they needed to find something for the Thess'kalan to eat and replenish his lost mass. Percy didn't want to risk consuming a corrupted beast, so he made sure to fully cleanse a tasty-looking buffalo before butchering it.

Checking the list, he had hoped to keep the ten points that they'd been awarded for the creature's purification, though it appeared that the event's organizers weren't fools. Slaughtering a perfectly healthy animal penalized Kassorith by nine points, bringing his score back to what it would have been if he'd killed the creature without cleansing it.

'Oh well… it's just a rounding error at this point,' Percy thought with a mental shrug.

If anything, this was good news. The organizers seemed to be quite strict at ensuring that a participant's score reflected their contribution in the planet's purification. Another mage would probably be severely punished if they were to directly interfere with Kassorith's work, making it even less likely that anyone would bother.

The other Blues had likely spread quite far from one another by now, so it would be difficult for anyone to even find the Thess'kalan. Not to mention that there was only a handful of people in the group who would be directly affected by his performance.

Ignoring their rivals for the time being, Percy focused on the task at hand.

The body of a Green beast was generally tough and barely edible, so he made sure to chop the bovine's flesh into tiny pieces before pounding them for good measure. Kassorith was better than most sapients at consuming weird things, due to his higher grade, enhanced physique and related bloodline, but it wouldn't hurt to prepare a less unpleasant meal.

Once the meat was as soft as it was going to be, Percy asked his host to inflict a few shallow cuts on his skin: just enough damage to meet the minimum threshold of his ability. Activating Moult, the Thess'kalan shed a layer of crimson scales held together by a thin membrane, though the rest of his body didn't lose much mass.

Eating the prepared food raw: mostly because Percy didn't want to waste time cooking it: Kassorith quickly regained the few centimetres of height that he had just lost, returning to full power in less than ten minutes. The snake person didn't stop there, repeating the process one more time to create a second crimson husk.

'Well? How useful are they?' Percy asked, some anticipation finding its way into his host's slit pupils.

This wasn't the first time they'd used Kassorith's bloodline after acquiring the Penitent's Decree. They'd activated it a couple of times to mend the Thess'kalan's injuries after some of his toughest fights in the tournament, so they already knew that the discarded flesh synergized well with spiritual blood.

However, they'd never tried it with such light wounds before, so Percy wasn't sure that they had shed enough skin for this to work. It might have been more prudent to inflict deeper cuts, but Kassorith would have to spend a lot more time fixing them, which might not leave them enough to catch up to Falanor.

'Hmmm… I can feel the sand directly under their scales, and I can even move them slightly, but they're not very practical without muscles or bones,' the Thess'kalan summarized after a few moments of deliberation.

To illustrate his point, he tried to make one of the empty husks stand. Due to the spiritual blood still lingering inside the abandoned flesh, he was able to make the hollow puppet wriggle and even pull itself upright momentarily, though it collapsed almost immediately.

At the same time, the Thess'kalan shared the new senses with Percy to give him an idea of their limits. The hollow sentries could only feel the ground within a metre or two of their scales, which wasn't very useful.

Percy frowned.

He'd wanted to create a pair of clones that would wander a kilometre away from Kassorith, expanding the range of their Sage's Pond so that they could scan the desert even more efficiently for new prey.

If everything had gone well, the crimson husks might have also served as bait to lure the aggressive animals from farther away, saving Kassorith a few precious seconds of flying toward them. Percy hadn't expected much, but accelerating their gains by even a modest fifty percent might be enough to reach first place by the end of the event.

The problem was that the clones clearly weren't mobile enough to keep up with Kassorith or evade a Green beast in their current state. Their senses were also far duller than those of the fiends that Percy could fashion out of his own spiritual blood.

'What now? Should we just forget about Falanor and stick to what we were doing?' Kassorith asked.

Percy remained silent for a couple of seconds before metaphorically shaking his head. 'Let's not give up just yet. The clones aren't perfect, but they might be salvageable with a few tweaks.'

Not bothering to explain, he slithered towards the nearest husk and poured a lot of liquid metal into its mouth, slowly inflating its body into one that was vaguely shaped like a real Thess'kalan.

Percy didn't saturate the space with metal, as that would have only made the clone too rigid and heavy to move. Instead, he tried to create a replica of Kassorith's skeleton, using loose-fitted screws, bolts and hinges to imitate the Thess'kalan's joints to the best of his ability. He even made sure that the bones were hollow to further limit their weight.

'I don't have any way to give it fake muscles: at least not without wasting a lot more time than we can afford: but the skeleton should at least help it stay upright. You'll still have to move it by controlling its skin though, because the mana will be too far from your body,' Percy said once he was done.

'It's better than before, but I'm not sure it can outrun a Green creature,' Kassorith protested.

'Not yet,' Percy agreed.

Leaning over the puppet, he used his Adaptive Arsenal to draw lots of unit cells on the metallic bones. The clone's husk was in the way of Percy's domain and senses, so he kept things relatively simple by focusing on a bunch of amplified lightness enchantments fuelled by ambient mana gathering runes.

'Well?' he asked again.

Kassorith had the puppet slither around for a minute or two, testing its speed and agility.

'It's still slow, but we need to drag the cleansing formation around anyway, so I don't think the clone will hold us back too much. The Green creatures can probably catch it after a relatively short chase, but that won't be a problem if we get to it first. It only has to travel half the distance toward us,' the Thess'kalan concluded.

Percy exhaled in relief, feeling a lot better about the plan. They had at least solved the issue with the puppet's mobility, though there was one final problem: its limited senses. As things stood, Kassorith wouldn't even know where the clone was going until it ended up in the belly of an infected beast.

'We'll have to cheat,' Micky suggested.

'Indeed,' Percy begrudgingly admitted.

Over the next ten minutes, he gave the second clone the same treatment while fine-tuning the skeletal structure and the enchantments of both puppets to make them a little faster still. At the same time, Percy seized the opportunity to covertly slip a drop of his own spiritual blood inside each fake Thess'kalan, causing their senses to explode outwards.

The puppets' unique vision was still inferior to his own, though it now included a faint thermal sense and Soul Vision. Percy felt the range of his Sage's Pond increase by a few dozen metres in every direction as two new sources of information entered his mind.

The difference was negligible while the puppets were right next to his host, but the impact should grow by an order of magnitude or two once the clones moved to the edge of his vision.

‘It should be good enough for this.’ Percy sighed internally. ‘It’s a pity that I have to go to such lengths to conceal my blood though.’

The clones weren’t nearly as mobile or subtle as the crimson bugs that he could create out of just his spiritual blood. Kassorith’s discarded flesh only obstructed their senses and slowed them down massively, but it was the only way to prevent any observers from noticing something strange.

In theory, Percy’s spiritual blood should be indistinguishable from Kassorith’s, so nobody would be able to detect it. If someone asked why the puppets were more independent than they were supposed to be, he could blame it on his runes or the Thess’kalan’s bloodline again.

Happy with the results, Percy and his companions took off once more, dragging the cleansing formation behind them and sending the scaled puppets in opposite directions. The clones slithered along the metallic dunes until they reached the boundaries of the Sage’s Pond.

Or rather, the former boundaries.

Just like he had expected, the organic probes caused his secondary domain to stretch and expand in an atypical shape, broadening his reach by another kilometre in each direction. His host did admittedly have to fly about twenty percent more slowly for the clones to keep up, but they should still sweep through the desert much faster than before.

Unfortunately, the crafting and testing session had eaten up another hour, so Percy knew that they couldn’t afford to waste another second. Resuming their search, the trio lured one beast after another under the giant formation, cleansing them for ten points a pop.

Four hours later, a much faster avian beast nearly caught one of the puppets. Kassorith managed to reach and pin down the creature before the clone suffered more than a couple of lacerations on its scaled back, but it had been close.

From then on, Percy decided to pull the puppets a little closer so that he would have more time to react. That reduced his range slightly, but it was better than losing a clone and having to waste another fifteen or so minutes replacing it.

Part of him felt dumb for not trying this approach earlier.

If they'd upgraded their strategy a dozen hours sooner, they would have surpassed Falanor with plenty of time to spare. However, Percy had been too focused on beating Zurvanai and Remlat to harbour any ambitious thoughts of catching up to the blessed Ollorian.

Regardless, there was nothing more that he could do: besides pressing onwards at full speed and hoping that all of his tricks would be enough to close the gap.

Hours flew by one after another, until a bright yellow sun rose in the horizon once more, the golden sands shimmering dazzlingly under its blinding light. The amethyst emblem on Kassorith's tunic also began blinking without warning, indicating that the competition was nearing its end.

The participants had probably spread pretty far by now, so the conclusion of the event wouldn't necessarily coincide with the sunrise in this region. Still, Percy understood that he was almost out of time, so he worked with his companions to cleanse a few more beasts, even going so far as to risk the puppets more liberally now that they wouldn't be needed for much longer.

About forty minutes later, the Thess'kalan was whisked out of the desert as suddenly as he had appeared, the trio finding themselves back on the metallic floor of the stadium.

Percy was about to check the score, eager to find out whether he and his companions had succeeded in the end, but he paused when he noticed that all the other participants were giving his host strange looks.

"What? Did you bastards think I was going to be happy with tenth place?"

Chapter 652: Updated score

The crowd erupted in cheers upon the return of the participants, and Percy even heard his host's name thrown around the stadium excitedly a couple of times.

At first, he was a little surprised that the spectators had observed the special event, though he probably shouldn't be. Whether it had taken place on Marador Prime or a different planet, the cleansing contest had ultimately been just another part of the tournament. They'd even been teleported to Spiralis B-3

directly from the arena, so it would have been strange if the spectators had bought their tickets for nothing.

'They probably watched us through those enchanted platforms that were floating in the sky,' he realized.

Ignoring the civilians and his less-than-pleased rivals for now, Percy brushed a scaled hand over the amethyst badge to pull up the event's scoreboard one final time. He had yet to check Kassorith's rank, so he wasn't sure whether they had managed to overtake Falanor in the end.

'Kassorith: 8198 points,

Falanor: 8011 points,

Zurvanai: 5666 points,

Remlat: 3902 points,

Semleni: 3885 points,

…'

'Thank the gods,' Percy thought, despite not being the most pious person.

It had been a close one, which was largely his own fault. If he could wind the clock back to the start of the event, there were many things that he would do differently, such as leaving the central plains sooner, or preparing the cleansing formation and the puppets from the very beginning. Had he used everything at his disposal the whole time, his host's score would have ended up well into five digits.

In Percy's defence, they hadn't been given any information about the contest beforehand, and this had been his first time actually possessing the means to push back against a demonic infestation. He hadn't

had many chances to explore the limits of his new Decree either, nor had he known what to expect from the other contestants, so the event had inevitably involved a lot of trial and error.

'Well, we won in the end,' Micky said with a mental shrug. 'Isn't that all that matters?'

Percy nodded internally, honestly feeling quite elated about that outcome. Not only had they earned the maximum number of points, but he had also gained some valuable experience in cleansing corrupted creatures.

He would obviously have to be a hundred times more careful before subjecting a sapient to the scorching beams produced by his formations, but at least he wouldn't be completely powerless the next time he set foot on an infected world.

'If I can get my hands on a blessing like Falanor's at some point, I might actually stand a decent chance of at least refreshing my mark on Robari without much risk,' he realized.

Finding the right Ring of Sacrilege within the next millennium would still be quite a challenge, yet he figured that it was a fine long-term objective to work towards as soon as he dealt with his immediate problems on Remior.

Leaving his ambitious plans aside for now, Percy scanned the other participants' faces more carefully, a few of whom were still glaring at his host in anger. It was mostly Remlat and Azalotheen, really, who had apparently only just realized that Kassorith would pose a serious threat to their qualification for the elimination phase.

The others appeared more curious than irritated. Having won most of his previous matches, the Thess'kalan had already proven that he was likely to finish in the top half of the group regardless of his performance in the special event, meaning that this result wouldn't affect the number of rewards that most of his rivals were going to get.

Even Zurvanai examined him with genuine interest, her usual impassive expression having given way to an undeterminable emotion for the first time since Percy met her. He doubted that she was concerned about losing her own spot in the next round, but Kassorith's performance had clearly caught her attention.

Thankfully, everyone eventually swallowed their anger or curiosity, not raising much of a fuss over the Thess'kalan's success. There was no point in doing that, and they were all probably tired after having spent the past couple of days slaughtering corrupted beasts and resisting their insidious influence.

Flying leisurely back towards the inn, Kassorith tinkered with the amethyst badge some more, eventually figuring out how to switch back and forth between the temporary scoreboard and the main one for their group. Luckily, it soon became clear that he had finally reclaimed the top spot in that one as well.

'Kassorith: 34 points,

Zurvanai: 34 points,

Remlat: 33 points,

Azalotheen: 30 points,

Falanor: 27 points,

…'

Okay… Percy's host technically hadn't hogged first place by himself. He was tied with Zurvanai, and that would change as soon as she wiped the floor with him, but at least she would probably do the same to Remlat and Azalotheen, leaving their relative positions mostly unchanged.

'It seems that we were awarded anywhere between one and eighteen points, in reverse order of our placement in the event,' Percy summarized after cross-referencing the scores of a handful of other participants that he was following.

It was a simple yet practical way to do things. Azalotheen had fallen further behind the other front-runners after his relatively poor performance: he'd barely made it to seventh place in the event. Falanor was still below the two-cored Maradorian, despite having ranked second earlier, his anti-infestation blessing having clearly not helped him much in his previous battles.

The rest weren't a threat either: provided that Kassorith managed to beat them all. Right now, it looked like the second ticket to the elimination phase would be decided between him and Remlat. However, the two had already fought, so the outcome would actually be determined by their fights against Zurvanai and Azalotheen, as well as the second special event.

'Better make them count then,' Percy concluded, though that was a problem for another day.

Reaching their room, Kassorith sat atop his coiled tail in silent meditation, joined by his spectral guests. They might not need to sleep like the other participants, but they could still use some rest after their tiring performance. Percy and Micky were in an even worse state than their host, as the two droplets of spiritual blood that they had invested into the Thess'kalan's puppets had cost them a good chunk of their already-tiny wisp.

Unlike Kassorith: who could recover rapidly in body and soul: the clone was unable to mend his own spectral injuries, so he wouldn't be able to produce more spiritual blood in the tournament. Unfortunately, the teleportation device had extracted them from Spiralis B-3 before they had the chance to retrieve the blood from the puppets. Not that they could have done that without arousing suspicion.

'It is what it is. Hopefully, we won't need any in the second event,' Micky muttered.

'I'm more worried about whether somebody saw us use it this time around,' Percy replied. 'I suppose that we were as careful as we could have been, but who knows what these people are even capable of?'

The good news was that the void tournament was frequented by talented mages with extremely powerful bloodlines, so the organizers were probably used to seeing all sorts of ridiculous feats that stretched the limits of what a mortal should be capable of.

So long as Percy and his companions maintained plausible deniability, nobody should bother them. All things considered, he didn't regret taking the risk for that extra point. It might make the difference between earning the Void Decree or not.

Over the next three days, the trio meditated without chatting much, taking none but the most necessary breaks: which apparently included Kassorith picking a few grains of golden sand that had remained lodged between his scales. Had this been Percy's early days in the Fungal Spire, he might have bothered

to collect them all, as he could have exchanged them for a few doses of elixir back home. Nowadays, he didn't place such a pitiful amount of money in his eyes.

By the time they felt ready to resume spying on their opponents' matches, Percy and his companions had already missed a couple of fights. He didn't want this to turn into a habit, but his host had already defeated three of the four contestants, so Percy's absence hadn't cost him too much useful information.

With every victory, the Thess'kalan's remaining opponents would continue to decrease, allowing Percy to start skipping more matches and using that time to learn about the Void Hand's most valuable planets. This was something that he had been planning to do since the start of the second phase, though he hadn't had much free time until now.

About a week later, it was Kassorith's turn to fight again.

His opponent was Semleni, one of the Inimits that had done fairly well in the special event, though Percy wasn't very worried. He'd already watched several of the bird-woman's previous matches and prepared a comprehensive strategy for this battle months ago.

The fight wasn't exactly an easy one, but Kassorith eventually won by sticking to Percy's plan and leveraging his superior enchantments. The Thess'kalan's eleventh match a few weeks after that didn't hold much suspense either.

However, there was another match of great importance taking place between Kassorith's eleventh and twelfth fights: one that Percy wouldn't miss for the world, since it was bound to be a major turning point for the entire group phase:

Remlat was up against Zurvanai.

Chapter 653: Remlat vs Zurvanai

Technically, watching the battle between the two-cored Inimit and the female Denyte wouldn't help Percy much in the tournament. His host had already faced Remlat and lost. He was unlikely to fare much better against Zurvanai, regardless of his preparations.

However, this would still be an important match to observe, as it could greatly alter the course of the entire group phase. On the off chance that the Inimit managed to win, he would climb back to first place and put Percy's team in a really rough spot.

Outside cheering for the Denyte to keep the leaderboard in order, Percy also had an almost academic interest in watching two of the Void Hand's most promising talents go at it without reservations.

Standing at the designated spot by the edge of the arena along with a bunch of other curious participants, Percy allowed his Sage's Pond to unfold as much as possible, enveloping a decent chunk of the stadium. Both combatants possessed rare affinities that vastly boosted their mobility, and he didn't want to miss out on more details than necessary during the high-level battle.

Remlat was located a few hundred metres away from Zurvanai, his expression atypically grim. He had already unfolded his wings, his mana rolling and tumbling wildly inside his cores: a sign that he was planning to go all out from the very start.

A wise decision.

Even the Denyte appeared serious, a rare hint of caution evident inside her large, mirror-like pupils. Her glowing hair swayed gently in the wind, the thick mana it contained creating all sorts of nauseating mirages in the air. Zurvanai was still the favourite in this fight, but she clearly had no intention of letting her guard down.

"Let the fight between Zurvanai and Remlat commence," the arena's automated voice said, causing the combatants to break into action.

The Inimit used both of his mana types to move away from the woman. A powerful flap of his wings combined with a violet burst of steam propelled him backwards, space itself twisting and warping to shorten his path. Within mere moments, he was well outside Percy's admittedly limited range, hovering close to a different edge of the arena.

At the same time, a few enchanted feathers coated in a layer of space mana appeared behind Zurvanai, slicing soundlessly through the air as they shot toward her neck. Remlat had obviously used his strategic retreat not only to protect himself, but also to distract and eliminate his opponent early.

Unfortunately for the Inimit, the black substance vanished from the projectiles before they so much as touched their target. Even the Decree-fuelled enchantments seemed to be robbed of their power, causing the soft objects to fall harmlessly against Zurvanai's small back, barely tickling her.

'Scary,' Kassorith muttered. 'I doubt she even noticed the feathers. She just activated her bloodline by instinct, and it was enough to completely negate Remlat's sneak attack.'

Percy echoed that feeling. From what little they'd managed to piece together about the woman's abilities, they knew that her bloodline allowed her to drain every mote of mana that fell within her range, rapidly and efficiently converting the resource to her own affinity.

It was simultaneously the ultimate defence and offense. In terms of mana regeneration and conversion, it was far more effective than even Percy's boosting art, though it didn't seem to affect the potency of the Denyte's spells, nor her physical strength.

'What an overpowered bloodline…' Percy groaned, feeling a little envious of the petite woman.

'You're one to speak,' Kassorith snapped back, sounding almost offended by the comment.

Whatever the Thess'kalan thought, Zurvanai's bloodline was undoubtedly one of the strongest that Percy had ever seen, as well as one of the main reasons she had done so well in the tournament thus far, to the point that Percy was genuinely unsure whether Clone was better.

Granted, his ability was more flexible and had granted him many unique opportunities. It was definitely better for a Red-born from a lesser spring, as he would have never stood a chance at attaining divinity without it. Had he been born with a Yellow core in a peak faction like the Void Hand, however, he might have been better off with whatever the woman had.

Still, Zurvanai's bloodline wasn't without its limitations.

Percy guessed that it could be beaten with enough brute force. He doubted that the Denyte could just stand and absorb a barrage of spells fired by an army of demigods. There had to be an upper boundary to the rate of her absorption, so being attacked with too much mana at once would quickly overpower her.

It was unclear what the exact limit was, but the talented Blue had found a rather interesting way to extend it.

Using her time mana lavishly, she slowed down any projectiles or opponents that entered the range of her bloodline while accelerating her own body. The discrepancy allowed her to consume foreign mana several times faster and even seemed to extend her range slightly.

The expenditure was enormous, but the combination of the mana she consumed and the resources stored inside her magical hair allowed her to keep the technique operating for much longer than expected, essentially creating a deadly feedback loop that rendered her opponents helpless.

Percy had initially struggled to get a proper read on her abilities precisely due to how seamlessly she had combined them into a single, coherent spell.

Seeing Remlat fly away, Zurvanai shot after him, using her time mana to accelerate her flight. The petite woman was upon the winged man within seconds, forcing him to warp space around his body once more to escape her bloodline. Like that, the two combatants whizzed around the arena rapidly, the Inimit tunnelling through space itself while the Denyte followed behind him.

‘They can’t keep this up forever,’ Micky noted.

Percy agreed with his friend. Zurvanai had her bloodline and ancestral Decree, but couldn’t maintain this insane expenditure merely by consuming the ambient mana around her. Remlat was extremely careful not to leave any of his mana in her path for her to steal.

On the flipside, the Inimit was also draining his reserves like crazy to stay away from the dangerous woman. His twin cores gave him more resources to work with than the average Blue, and his feathers allowed him to use them more efficiently. However, his steam mana wasn’t nearly as effective at keeping him outside Zurvanai’s reach, and left more traces in his wake for his pursuer to absorb, so he didn’t favour it.

‘Such a bizarre battle. Remlat doesn’t even have the time to voice an incantation to empower his spells,’ Kassorith pointed out.

‘What difference would it make?’ Micky asked. ‘Anything he throws at her would be consumed anyway.’

‘Yeah. But she’s going to run out of mana first,’ the Thess’kalan replied with a mental shrug.

‘She is. This is what Remlats wants too, which is why he didn’t bother to hide with his invisibility bloodline. He needed to bait her into emptying her core,’ Percy concurred. ‘It won’t matter though. Even if she stands still without a drop of mana in her sternum, there isn’t much that he can do to her. There’s a good chance that this match will end in a draw.’

Even if Remlat managed to outlast his opponent, trying to attack her would only provide her with more fuel to resume her chase. Had this been a different battlefield, he could have possibly ripped out chunks of mundane stone from the environment to throw at her, hoping that they would be heavy enough to overpower her domain.

Sadly for him, it wasn’t possible for mere Blues: even the elites participating in the void tournament: to rip out the enchanted metal of the arena floor. The Inimit’s arsenal also seemed to lack any powerful attacks that didn’t contain mana.

Had it been Percy facing Zurvanai, he could have maybe tweaked his formations so that they would only release beams of concentrated heat, being extra careful to filter out any unconverted specks of lightning mana from his blasts. However, he doubted that he and Kassorith could outrun or outlast the Denyte long enough to even prepare their constructs.

Just like he had predicted, the female mage was the first to exhaust her reserves, despite her multitude of advantages.

She was no longer able to chase Remlat, but she didn’t seem very worried. What little ambient mana she could still draw from her surroundings was more than enough to protect herself when combined with her willpower.

From then on, Zurvanai only maintained a thin film of time mana around her body, probably so that she wouldn’t completely lose the benefits that came from the temporal acceleration.

Surprisingly, the Inimit borrowed a page from Percy's book, taking advantage of his opponent's immobility to prepare formations of his own. It took several minutes, and he was interrupted a couple of times by Zurvanai who recovered enough mana to momentarily resume the chase, though he eventually managed to put something together.

Combining his enchanted feathers with a rudimentary runecrafting language, the winged man created a rough, two-layered heating formation fuelled out of steam mana. It was a poor substitute for Kassorith's attacks, though Remlat was clearly hoping to snipe Zurvanai from afar with it.

It was a commendable effort, though the spell wasn't destructive enough to pierce her defences. The fact that the Inimit struggled to completely filter every trace of fire mana from the beams only made things worse, as it allowed Zurvanai to destabilize the attacks and boost her acceleration.

Percy sighed in relief, honestly glad that Remlat was unlikely to win. A tie would still give him one point: which wasn't ideal: but it was better than the alternative. About an hour into the battle, the Inimit actually suggested that exact outcome, though Zurvanai surprised everyone by declining the winged person's offer.

The stalemate continued for hours, with Remlat constantly tweaking his formation to the best of his ability in an attempt to get through his opponent's invisible barrier. The female Denyte used whatever mana she recovered to make the Inimit's life harder, slowing his progress down.

Eventually, the organizers were forced to postpone the next day's match, and later the one after that, recreating a situation similar to Kassorith's first fight on Thess'kala.

'Why is she being so stubborn?' Micky eventually asked. 'Is she that confident that he'll pass out first?'

Percy and Kassorith had only won that battle due to the Insomnia trait: which they knew that Zurvanai didn't have. If anything, Remlat was more likely to have given himself a mindset with a similar effect before the match, and the female Denyte had only made her situation worse by repeatedly accelerating the flow of time around her own body, thus exhausting herself faster.

Thinking about something, Percy couldn't help but gasp. 'Don't tell me? Did she plan for this outcome?'

Paying closer attention to the film of time mana hugging the woman's skin, he noticed that it seemed to shift subtly whenever Remlat attacked her, only to switch back to its previous state as soon as the Denyte resumed resting.

Percy hadn't spotted the change sooner, as he wasn't that knowledgeable about the time affinity, but he grew increasingly certain of his guess as he continued to observe the female mage.

'She's switching between acceleration and deceleration!' he told his companions, before elaborating. 'She's speeding herself up whenever she has to chase after him or absorb a large amount of mana, but she's actually spent most of the battle in dilated time!'

To Remlat and the spectators, the battle had raged on for nearly four Maradorian days, but Zurvanai probably hadn't experienced more than a couple.

It was ingenious.

The match continued for several more days. After the first week, the Inimit started yawning frequently, his eyelids drooping as his formations grew sloppier. Zurvanai also showed signs of exhaustion, but they were far scarcer and less pronounced.

'Is it me, or is she more skilled at slowing things down than speeding them up?' Micky asked. 'The incoming projectiles get decelerated more than her own body accelerates, despite her having to spread the mana thin to cover a larger area.'

'It must be a function of her blessing,' Kassorith agreed.

Either way, the Inimit appeared to have realized that his opponent had played him for a fool, though there wasn't much that he could do. Zurvanai was really good at switching between the two states of her mana, and her bloodline was always active since it didn't seem to cost anything to maintain, thus constantly protecting her from sneak attacks.

Remlat only had two options: he could harass her more frequently, but her ability would consume a barrage of weaker spells even in her decelerated state. Alternatively, he could fire massive attacks to

force her to accelerate, but that would only cause him to run out of mana himself, thus giving her a new way to end the battle.

About nine days after the start of the match: a mind-numbing length of time for most spectators, yet one that Percy found rather informative: Remlat was finally forced to admit defeat. The Inimit fell another two points below Kassorith, making this the best possible outcome, though Percy no longer harboured any hope that his host would fare better against the talented woman.

Zurvanai was clearly the sort of opponent that he would only ever defeat with his main body. And she was going to grow even stronger once she received her second rare affinity.

Chapter 654: Researching the alliance

Kassorith's fourteenth match was against Zurvanai.

Percy advised his host to surrender before the fight even started. He typically wasn't one to give up without trying, but he was pragmatic enough to understand that they didn't stand a chance.

In theory, there were ways to attack the female Denyte from outside her range without using mana, yet it was obvious that the Thess'kalan would be unable to keep his distance from the woman for long enough to prepare the necessary equipment.

Once she reached them, Kassorith's core would be sucked dry in an instant.

Fighting without mana wasn't completely impossible for Percy's team. He and his host had done it once before during the regional tournament, defeating the female Thess'kalan from the Ancestral Lineage Sect in close combat. However, they had been on roughly equal footing to their opponent at the time, as her mana suppression bloodline had affected her as much as her enemies.

This time, Kassorith wouldn't be able to forge even a tiny dagger out of metal mana, let alone a scythe. Sure, Percy's domain and his host's mutations were quite powerful, but Zurvanai would still have full access to her magic, so it was a hopeless situation.

Percy would also rather not test what would happen to his wisp when Kassorith's spectral stitches fell under the influence of the Denyte's bloodline. While they had technically been woven out of the

Thess'kalan's soul and should survive the absence of mana, there was no reason to gamble with Percy's very ability to participate in the tournament over nothing. If something went terribly wrong, he might find himself ejected from the Thess'kalan's body and back on Remior empty-handed.

'It's fine. We've taken this loss into consideration from the beginning. We're still ahead of Remlat,' Micky consoled the others.

Later that week, the pair of two-cored participants happened to be pitted against each other. Azalotheen wasn't as much of a threat to the front-runners after performing poorly in the special event, so Percy rooted for him, hoping that he would defeat the Inimit despite his second core being merely at Green. Should that happen, they might not have to worry as much about their future matches.

Unfortunately, the winged man defeated the silver-skinned Maradorian without much difficulty, putting more pressure on Percy and Kassorith not to lose to Nawko's kinsman later.

The good news was that Azalotheen wasn't nearly as strong as Zurvanai or Remlat, so beating him wasn't impossible. However, he was still a step above the other participants that Percy and his companions had defeated.

Either way, Percy had already come up with detailed strategies to overcome most of Kassorith's remaining opponents, meaning that he could ignore more matches than before. He split his free time evenly between planning specifically for his fight against the Maradorian and trying to learn more about the Void Hand.

The information the participants had access to was sadly restricted to the tournament and its rewards, thus greatly limiting what Percy could find out about the alliance in general. However, that didn't mean that he had come up empty-handed.

Cross-referencing what few clues he could learn from the terminals with what Nawko was willing to share, he identified two important locations that he would love to visit in the future.

The first was Denytos IV: one of the Denytes' main worlds. Specifically, Percy was interested in a grand temple erected in one of the planet's largest cities, where as many as seven Rings of Sacrilege were kept.

Apparently, the artifacts belonged to the whole alliance, not just Zurvanai's people. The member-factions of the Void Hand had initially resisted sharing the cosmic treasures, but the Denytes had eventually pressured their peers into pooling them together in a single location that could be defended more easily.

The alliance had even implemented a powerful temporal Decree like the Thirsty Valley: probably an even better one, in fact: allowing those who used the rings to absorb the blessings dozens of times faster, thus massively shortening the wait time to acquire one.

The other founding factions had obviously wanted to keep the treasury on their own worlds, though the Denytes had argued that the Maradorians were already entrusted with the alliance's most talented mortals every year through the void tournament, and that the others controlled their own strategic resources, eventually getting everyone to concede to their demands.

The only reason Percy had been able to learn about this was because the opportunity to use a Ring of Sacrilege was available as a reward to the top four of the competition, as was the chance to claim a rare affinity-changing treasure.

Percy had initially been surprised to hear that the requirements for those two rewards were even stricter than those for earning the Void Decree, though Nawko had explained that this had more to do with their scarcity than their value. Acquiring a second mana core was definitely more impactful than a blessing or changing one's existing affinity, so the Void Decree was still considered the ultimate reward of the tournament.

However, rare affinity-changing treasures were consumable items with short expiration dates that weren't always available. Rings of Sacrilege could only be used by a single person at a time, with even gods hoping to accelerate the acquisition of new concepts through them, leaving the alliance with no choice but to severely limit the number of people that could borrow them each year. The Void Decree, on the other hand, was also rather costly to grant, but not as much as these other rewards.

'It's a pity that we're unlikely to climb that high.' Percy sighed.

If he were to earn both the Void Decree and a rare treasure, he could potentially end up with a total of three rare affinities. If he happened to be compatible with one of the Void Hand's rings as well, he might even be able to acquire another blessing.

Metatron had mentioned that one of the peak factions possessed a ring that matched one of Percy's, Micky's, or Nephthys' affinities and would grant a concept that was effective against demonic infestations. With any luck, this might be it.

Unfortunately, even reaching the top eight was starting to look like quite the challenge, let alone any higher. Beating Azalotheen or performing well in the next special event might not be impossible, but winning even a single match in the elimination phase probably was.

Besides, even if the alliance possessed a suitable ring and Percy managed to earn the opportunity to use it, getting it to his main body would be a whole other problem.

'It might still be worth grabbing an active-type Decree that can only be obtained on Denytos IV so that we can mark the planet though,' Micky suggested.

Learning about the Void Hand's Elemental Sources was a lot harder, since the alliance actively tried to keep their locations secret even from their own people. Nobody wanted a Source on their main planet, as it would force their mortals to be born with a single affinity.

While there were ways to isolate a Source's influence, they weren't perfect, so factions that owned them preferred to keep them on secondary worlds. Sadly, that also limited their gods' ability to protect them, since deities couldn't set foot on foreign planets.

Consequently, even though an opportunity to meditate near the Elemental Source of one's affinity was extremely valuable to mortals and gods alike, the Void Hand only offered it to trustworthy mortals as a reward for exemplary service: and winning a tournament wasn't it. Even their gods had to go through many hoops to access them without being physically present.

Once again, Metatron and Lanthaniel probably knew a lot more than Nawko about the topic, but Percy didn't expect the titan or his subordinate to share anything with him before he accepted the pentapus' terms.

Fortunately, the female Maradorian wasn't entirely uninformed about the subject. She reluctantly explained that the Void Hand was confirmed to possess four Elemental Sources. There was a good chance they had even more than that, but those were the only four whose existence had already leaked to hostile greater springs, which was why the founding factions didn't see any reason to lie about them.

Even Nawko didn't know where three of those four Elemental Sources were located, but she shared a rumour that the earth Source could be accessed through a teleportation platform on the Inimits' homeland.

Percy currently lacked that affinity, yet he understood that this could change in the future as he acquired more cores, familiars, and aspects. Even if he became a god without earth mana, he would eventually have to master the concepts of every common affinity to reach the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage, so having access to the place wouldn't hurt. It was currently less important than Rings of Sacrilege or free-type Decrees, but he wanted to mark one of the Inimits' planets anyway.

Percy's schemes aside, the tournament continued to progress, the group phase itching closer to the end with each passing week. Eventually, it was time for Kassorith's sixteenth match.

It was arguably one of the most important milestones left in the second round of the competition: along with the second event: as the Thess'kalan would finally be facing Azalotheen.

Before slithering onto the arena for the fated battle, Percy pulled up the scoreboard once again, taking note of the situation at the top of the rankings. Before today, everyone had fought the same number of times, so it was as good an opportunity as any to check his host's rank.

'Zurvanai: 46 points,

Kassorith: 44 points,

Remlat: 43 points,

Azalotheen: 38 points,

Semleni: 34 points

Falanor: 33 points,

…’

Chapter 655: Sixteenth match

Azalotheen opened the fight by releasing a large amount of mana from both cores and fusing it into a cloud of greenish powder.

It wasn’t all that surprising that the Void Hand’s two-cored mages were capable of affinity fusion, though Remlat hadn’t used it in any of his own matches. Percy wasn’t sure whether the Inimit had yet to figure out how to combine space and steam mana, or whether he simply hadn’t felt that it would change the outcome of his battles.

Either way, the Maradorian was clearly not pulling his punches, despite having not possessed his second core for nearly as long as the winged man.

The good news was that the grade discrepancy would limit the frog-person’s output significantly, though Percy would still rather avoid breathing the strange powder in. Covering his host’s body in a layer of steel, he worked alongside Micky to enchant the material for added protection.

The particles collided violently against the metal, the moss-coloured tornado already devouring the outer layer of Kassorith’s magical armour. The Maradorian’s blessing allowed him to overpower the Thess’kalan’s steel even faster than he otherwise would have.

Efenat’s Decree increased the volume of microscopic projectiles by thirty percent, and the Maradorian was already croaking an incantation to empower his spells further through Jolthoria’s Decree.

Knowing that they couldn’t afford to lose their barrier this soon into the fight, Percy used his willpower to extricate his host from the raging cyclone as Kassorith wrapped his tail around a newly-forged greatsword to accelerate his flight.

‘Shit… We breathed some in,’ Kassorith spat amidst coughs, the acrid flavour of the toxins mixing with the metallic taste of his blood.

Percy grimaced internally, though he forced himself to remain calm. ‘I’m sure that we can handle this much since his second core is weaker, but we still need to limit how much we inhale.’

The corrosive properties of the fused mana had come from Azalotheen’s dust affinity, though its virulent toxicity had come from his second core. The Maradorian was using the same trick that experienced life mages like Archibald relied on to infect their opponents.

This particular blend of elements gave the Maradorian a more violent way of injecting the insidious substance into the bodies of his enemies. Thankfully, Kassorith’s enhanced physique should offer him some resistance against all manners of toxins, though diseases didn’t fall completely within that category.

Percy had done his best to cover his host’s mouth and nose with a layer of metal from the start of the fight, even using heating enchantments to cleanse and filter the air they inhaled.

Blues could potentially hold their breath for several minutes, but inhaling was also required for mana regeneration. Kassorith was already greatly disadvantaged in that department, so they couldn’t afford to be too cautious.

The Thess’kalan shot through the air with the Maradorian hot on his tail. The frog-person launched wave after wave of the putrid resource, shaping his mana into colossal hands that tried to close around Kassorith as if he were a gnat.

With two cores and a secondary soul affinity at his disposal, Azalotheen was regenerating his resources much faster than Kassorith. Timing his spells with the completion of his incantations, he took advantage of two additional Decrees to further empower his attacks.

The Maradorian’s dust affinity alone would have been troublesome enough. That much had been obvious since before the start of the battle, otherwise Azalotheen would have never made it to the top eight of the tournament before. The addition of the life component only made the powder more annoying.

The good news was that Kassorith’s spiritual blood and Greater Thess’kalan Physique were working overtime to purge the disease from his body. However, Percy knew that his host’s reserves wouldn’t last much longer if he kept flying around at this speed.

It soon became clear that their opponent wasn't interested in waiting for that either.

Using his bloodline, the Maradorian applied an invisible pull on Kassorith's body, greatly slowing him down. This gave Azalotheen a chance to finally catch him with a giant, hand-shaped construct, the sickly-green particles making crisp sounds as they collided with the Thess'kalan's armour.

Fortunately, Percy had managed to upgrade the enchantments during the chase, so the Maradorian couldn't completely destroy the metallic barrier. Several streams of green powder still drilled through the material and Kassorith's reinforced scales alike, seeping into his bloodstream.

The Thess'kalan coughed violently once more, mouthful after mouthful of putrid blood mixing into the cloud of magical sand harassing him.

Kassorith expended nearly half of his remaining reserves, timing an explosion of superheated lightning and metallic shrapnel with a burst of Percy's domain to free himself from the apocalyptic sandstorm.

The heating formation was incomplete, but it did its job for now, barely allowing the Thess'kalan to resume fleeing. The Maradorian chased him around the arena once more as Percy scrambled to complete the three-layered enchantment.

It wasn't like his host had much spare mana to waste on the intricate disk, but they would never win the match without the means to strike back, so they had no choice but to invest some there.

About a minute later, Azalotheen activated his bloodline to pull Kassorith closer again, causing a similar sequence to repeat itself. Thankfully, the frog-person couldn't use the ability too often. As far as bloodlines went, his was among the weakest in the tournament, though he obviously had several other weapons to fall back to.

Once again, the Maradorian forced more toxins into the Thess'kalan's veins, extracting a few more mouthfuls of infected blood from his target before Percy and his host managed to extricate themselves.

"I'm honestly impressed that you've lasted this long against me. I suppose that it's not an accident you've climbed so high up the leaderboard," Azalotheen suddenly said, his voice calm but loud enough

to be heard through the rushing winds. “If you manage to replicate your success in the next special event, you might even beat Remlat to the next round. However, don’t expect to win this fight.”

Listening to the taunts, Percy got his host to stop running away. Their core was almost empty, and they needed the few scraps of mana that they had left to fuel their counterattack, so it wasn’t like they could afford to fly another centimetre.

Azalotheen paused too, though he didn’t immediately attack. He probably thought that Kassorith was going to surrender.

Percy took advantage of his opponent’s patience, letting the moment stretch for a couple of seconds before speaking with his host’s mouth. “Do you mind explaining something before we end this?”

“Hmmm? Are you trying to stall?” the Maradorian asked back. “Don’t think that I haven’t noticed that heating formation you are charging beneath your armour. It’s a nifty trick, but you’ve used it a few too many times in the tournament already. You’ll never hit me.”

Percy shrugged. “I’m pretty sure that I will hit you, but that’s beside the point. My question for you is genuine.”

Azalotheen gestured for him to speak, clearly not taking his threats seriously.

“Why did you breathe your own fused mana in? Are you not worried about infecting yourself with the disease?” Percy asked.

The Maradorian frowned at the strange question, though he still took the time to answer. “If you must know, life users who fight like me cultivate their viruses inside their own bodies, so they’re already immune to them. Life mana can’t create toxins out of thin air: it just accelerates the growth of microorganisms. Breathing my mana in and out is a way for me to recycle the dead cells into healthy ones, thus maintaining the potency of the disease.”

“I see…” Percy muttered with a slight nod, having expected an explanation along those lines. “Unfortunately, it’s going to cost you today’s match.”

Opening his host's mouth, he pointed at Kassorith's fangs. The Maradorian's eyes widened as he seemed to realize something, though it was too little too late for that.

"Did you know that Thess'kalans are venomous? Those with my mutation are even more so than the rest," Percy continued. "Our glands aren't powered by a mana core, and we can't produce much venom, so it's usually difficult to use in a high-level battle. It's not every day an opponent is helpful enough to inhale my toxins on his own."

The sandstorm converged upon Kassorith with seemingly no warning, the Maradorian clearly eager to finish the job. Percy ignored the incoming attack entirely, offering no resistance as the particles ate through his host's armour. His senses remained locked onto his opponent.

He hadn't chatted with Azalotheen just for fun. He'd been sifting through countless predictions of the frog-person's next moves, patiently waiting for the venom to kick in and create an opening.

Kassorith had admittedly only managed to mix a minuscule amount of toxins into the blood that he had spat, meaning that the Maradorian couldn't have absorbed much. Azalotheen would barely be disoriented for a moment, so Percy would have to make it count.

More rivers of fused mana slammed against Kassorith, denting his armour and sending him tumbling through the air. Even if Percy had wanted to dodge, he couldn't: not while charging up the disk and trying to predict his opponent's moves. Percy ignored the broken bones, torn muscles and scorching blood, concentrating entirely on Azalotheen.

A couple of seconds later, he finally saw it.

The Maradorian suffered a pang of disorientation, his movements lapsing for the briefest of instants. It wasn't much, but the toxins had dulled his reaction speed just enough for the shadow of a crimson beam to connect.

And then, the real attack landed too, fired right through Kassorith's armour as Percy and his host struggled to stabilize themselves just long enough to deliver the blast.

Two Blues fell from the sky, crashing against the enchanted floor with the force of meteors at roughly the same time. Had it not been for the stadium's enchantments, they would have both turned into minced meat.

Even under divine protection, Kassorith's body was an absolute mess, though Percy's mind was oddly serene.

Azalotheen was right.

Even if they lost this battle, he would make sure to win the special event. They had come too far… risked too much… tried too hard to fall now. Even if they lost the first fight in the elimination phase and missed out on the Void Decree in the end, Percy was going to make damn sure to earn another two prizes before returning home.

The automatic voice spoke, breaking the tense silence in the arena to declare the outcome of the match:

"Fatal damage prevented. Both combatants are unable to continue. The fight has ended in a draw."

Chapter 656: Tanarill

Just like the previous time, Kassorith slithered to the centre of the circle glowing on the arena floor, waiting alongside the other participants to be teleported to the location of the second special event. Once more, Percy pulled up the scoreboard to confirm where he and his host stood after the completion of everyone's seventeenth and final match.

'Zurvanai: 50 points,

Remlat: 47 points,

Kassorith: 47 points,

Azalotheen: 41 points,

Semleni: 36 points,

Falanor: 35 points,

…'

'Only the event's left… we have to make it count,' Kassorith pointed out.

They may have failed to defeat Azalotheen, but the rare draw that they had managed to wrench out of the Maradorian's webbed digits had given them the point necessary to keep up with Remlat. Sadly, the two-cored Inimit had beaten the Thess'kalan before, so he would be the one qualifying to the next round in case they ended up tied.

The extra point they had earned didn't change the fact that they had to outperform the winged man in the event, but at least they were now guaranteed to pass if they succeeded. Had they lost to Azalotheen, they could have potentially failed to earn that spot to the elimination phase even if they were to rank first in the event.

'Good enough. Our fate is in our own hands,' Percy said. 'At the end of the day, that's all that matters.'

Leaving Remlat aside, Azalotheen himself was far below the front-runners, so he wouldn't be as much of a threat moving forward. Kassorith might not even need to do very well in the event if it happened to be one that the two-cored Inimit was bad at.

It was with these optimistic thoughts that the crimson-scaled Thess'kalan and his spectral companions got whisked out of the stadium, finding themselves on what they assumed to be another new planet.

This time, they hadn't been separated from the other contestants, the whole group arriving together. Kassorith stood on solid ground, slightly damp dirt giving way beneath his tail. A series of colourful runes dimmed rapidly across a few pebbles that had been scattered in the mud as the teleportation enchantment faded from view, seemingly to preserve the style of the almost-primitive environment.

Tall blades of grass swayed under a gentle breeze to tickle the scales on Kassorith's stomach. The much shorter Denytes in the group were covered entirely by the plants, with even Zurvanai: the imposing mage who had dominated every single contest so far: looking like a child lost within the dense foliage.

Alien bugs that Percy didn't have names for crawled up and down the elongated leaves. Others buzzed overhead, some stopping to drink out of glistening beads of dew as a few feasted inside the occasional flower. The fresh scent of spring filled Kassorith's nostrils, the sounds of chirping birds echoing in his ears.

A golden sun shone brightly overhead, though its rays were partly obscured by dense canopies, painting the forest floor in a crisscrossing tapestry of glares and shadows.

Most notably, every Inimit in the group: Remlat included: seemed more at ease than the others, the tension in their expressions all but evaporating as hints of nostalgia flashed in their pupils. Almost as if they had just returned home…

In fact, Percy was pretty sure that this was exactly what had happened. The second event would be taking place on one of the Inimits' worlds.

The realization caused him to clench his borrowed fists, his soul flaring with worry. The last thing he needed right now was a contest where Remlat held the home advantage. However, Percy understood that there was nothing he could do, besides gritting his gums and hoping that the organizers wouldn't force them into an unfair competition.

Percy was broken out of his thoughts when a male Inimit that he didn't recognize landed soundlessly a dozen or so metres away from the group, moving with enough speed and grace to put even a White to shame.

At first, Percy thought that the newcomer was a god, since he couldn't detect a mana core in his sternum. Upon closer inspection, he spotted faint traces of the organ in the Inimit's chest. The winged man's soul definitely belonged to a mortal, and his face: albeit deceptively youthful: lacked the sort of unnatural perfection that only a true ascension to the Concept realm could bring.

'He must be a demigod then,' Percy deduced.

“Greetings contestants,” the Clear mage said, infusing his willpower into his words for added gravitas. Despite his youthful appearance, the evenness in his tone betrayed the dozens of millennia he had undoubtedly weathered.

“Before anything else, let me welcome you to Tanarill. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Void Hand’s history and geography, Tanarill is one of our most important planets. It may not be where we Inimits originated from, but it is the planet we have prospered the most on, as well as the second greatest economic hub in the entire alliance,” the demigod continued.

Percy didn’t need to be told anything else. He still had no idea why they had been summoned here, or whether Tanarill was one of the planets that he could access the Elemental Source of the earth affinity from, but he’d already contacted his main body to get the place marked.

The other participants, on the other hand, appeared more concerned. The winged man’s words caused them to break into chatter, a few going as far as to directly express their displeasure with this arrangement. Clearly, Percy wasn’t the only one afraid that the Inimits in the group were going to receive special treatment.

He did find the Maradorians’ protests a little hypocritical, however. Didn’t most of the tournament take place on their own world? The selfish bastards had nothing to say about that.

Under different circumstances, a bunch of Blues might have hesitated to voice their complaints before a Clear mage, but Percy’s rivals weren’t regular people. As the most talented, most pampered geniuses of their entire generation, they probably didn’t place a regular demigod in their eyes, regardless of how easily he could squash them. They all knew that they would be surpassing him after a promotion or two, and that their factions would never allow any harm to befall them here.

To his credit, the almost-divine Inimit merely chuckled at their rude behaviour, seemingly not taking any offense.

“I understand that many of you are worried about the Inimits among you having an unfair advantage in the event, but I assure you that we have no intention of slighting our guests. Tanarill has only been chosen as the venue for this contest because it houses a unique facility. If anything, you should probably be happy about this, since this event is as much of an opportunity as it is a test. It’s not every year that our alliance can afford such lavish expenditure.”

Percy was quite intrigued, already feeling happy about his decision to mark this planet. The other participants grew silent at once, probably waiting for the demigod to elaborate, though the Clear mage said nothing else, appearing to draw amusement from their suspense. Instead, he took off once again, gesturing for the Blues to follow him.

Shrugging, Kassorith joined the rest as they formed a beeline behind their guide, giving Percy a chance to study the place more carefully.

Initially, he'd thought that the teleportation platform had spat them out in the middle of a forest and, well… he hadn't been wrong about that. Not exactly. However, it didn't take him long to realize that there was so much more to this place.

Flying under the shade of towering trees, he leisurely examined their lush canopies, spotting small huts standing atop their thick branches and long, hanging bridges linking each tree to its neighbours.

Upon realizing that there were civilians resting inside some of these treehouses, Percy withdrew his senses and allowed the range of his Sage's Pond to shrink, so as to respect the natives' privacy.

Not every Inimit was huddled up at home, however, with several people flying around the strange forest. Children giggled playfully as they chased one another atop some of the larger trees, the adults flying purposefully from building to building as they conducted their daily business. Only a handful of elderly people with weaker cores appeared to have any need for the bridges, their old wings clearly too worn to support their flight.

'Wow… are all of their cities integrated in forests like this?' Micky asked. 'Either way, this place is a million times prettier than Oll.'

Percy nodded through their connection to indicate his agreement. Oblivious to their thoughts, the demigod continued to lead the group towards an as-of-yet unknown location, flying just slowly enough for the talented Blues to keep up with his pace.

Ten minutes later, he stopped at a large, circular clearing, with nothing but a giant flowerbed bathing beneath the midday sun, colourful petals from dozens of species of plants dancing in the air above it.

“Some of you may have realized that this place is under the influence of an infrastructure-type Decree. Previously, we have evaluated your combat skills and your ability to resist or effectively fight back against demonic infestations. Today, we will be testing something else entirely: whether you possess the potential to ascend to the Concept realm and become gods.”

Chapter 657: Ishkuria’s Decree (1)

The participants remained silent, waiting for their guide to elaborate.

“All of you stand here before me due to your exceptional ability to fight against mages at higher grades. Our alliance has invested heavily in your growth because of that talent, hoping that you will one day become some of our strongest gods. Unfortunately, raw magical prowess or powerful bloodlines will mean very little if you ultimately fail to forge your internal worlds and attain divinity,” the demigod explained before clearing his throat. “This is why we wish to evaluate your potential in that department.”

“Excuse me, sir,” an Inimit said, obviously feeling more at ease interrupting a Clear mage of his own species. “I was under the impression that the two things you have mentioned are strongly correlated. Don’t powerful mages generally have an easier time comprehending concepts?”

“Indeed,” the demigod conceded. “Each of you is considered more capable than the average mage at exploring your affinity, yet there have still been many champions of the void tournament who have died of old age after failing to become gods. Even among those who succeed, only a tiny fraction can hope to climb to the current known pinnacle of that realm.”

“Isn’t that just a matter of spending enough time to master every available concept?” a female Ollorian asked, her voice sounding a little raspy due to an obvious lump in her throat.

“Yes and no,” the demigod replied with a shake of his head. “Reaching the peak of the Self-Discovery stage is trivial, since anyone who manages to comprehend the foundational concept of their affinity is capable of learning a few more concepts given enough time. Climbing through the Elemental Acquisition stage, on the other hand, is a different matter entirely. Whenever a god attempts to incorporate a new affinity into their internal world, they have to simultaneously comprehend the associated composite: or higher-order: concepts. The process grows exponentially more difficult each time, culminating with the addition of the fifth common element, which is widely considered to be one of the toughest milestones for a god to reach. It’s even harder than casting a Decree and becoming a titan.”

The demigod paused, probably to give the mortals in his charge a chance to digest his words. Upon scanning their faces and confirming that nobody had any further questions, he continued.

“Ishkuria is among our oldest and most revered titanesses. She originally attained divinity with “just” a water affinity, theoretically capping her potential below deities who ascend with rare concepts. In practice, there are very few gods in the universe who have ever climbed to the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage like her, and fewer still who have cast a Decree after doing so, which is why the flowerbed you are currently standing in is so valuable. It allows a mage to briefly experience common and composite affinities that they do not possess, which provides us with an excellent way to measure your ability to master new elements. Finally, it gives you the opportunity to experience a foreign affinity, so that you will have an easier time comprehending it in the future.”

Percy was already quite impressed with what he was hearing.

After his chat with Phoebe, he had spent a lot of time thinking about ways to obtain more mana cores and rare affinities, since those were considered impossible to acquire after becoming a god. He had reasoned that he could worry about figuring out the missing common and composite affinities later, so they wouldn’t be his priority while he was still a mortal.

However, the titaness had also made it very clear that even mastering all the combinations of the basic affinities was quite the challenge. Phoebe herself was still working on her third common element after nearly two million years.

Sure, she had also begun her journey with a mind affinity, bringing her total number of elements to four: or eight if one counted the fused mana types separately: but this Ishkuria woman had apparently mastered five common elements: or thirty-one different affinities in total: making her significantly more powerful than Phoebe.

If it was true that so few deities made it that far: and it certainly seemed so: there was plenty of power to be gained even without rare affinities, thus the opportunity to experience more elements as a mortal was nothing to scoff at.

‘I doubt that applies to us though,’ Micky said.

‘Probably not,’ Percy agreed.

Unlike the other contestants, he had already wielded most elements before: to various extents: through his clones and familiars. He could always possess a body with a desired mana type again if he needed more hands-on experience, and he was definitely going to be doing a lot more of that before attempting his ascension to divinity.

What was undoubtedly an invaluable Decree and a strategic resource for even a peak faction like the Void Hand was more-or-less useless for Percy. Consequently, while the other participants’ eyes flashed with greed and anticipation, Percy and Micky weren’t nearly as interested.

‘Screw you both,’ Kassorith spat through their connection. ‘For some of us, this is still a good thing.’

Percy shrugged internally. ‘The good news is that we’ll probably have a major advantage in this event. As long as you don’t get in our way, feel free to take what you want out of this opportunity.’

“The rules of the event are simple,” the demigod suddenly said, breaking Percy and his companions out of their short conversation. “See that empty patch of dirt?” he asked, pointing to a small, circular region in the middle of the flowerbed.

After getting a few nods back from the contestants, he continued. “You will take turns stepping onto that spot. Let’s do it in reverse order of your final ranks in the previous event, to keep things suspenseful for the audience,” he said with a chuckle. “You will be given the option of any common or composite affinity you want, though you will receive no points if you select any elements that overlap with your own. After that, you will be given twenty-five standard minutes to practice with the new element before performing the most impressive spell that you are capable of.”

“Only twenty-five minutes?” a male Denyte asked with a grimace. “That’s nothing! Even the most talented mage would need a few days to get used to a brand-new affinity.”

The corners of the demigod’s beak curved slightly. “Keep things simple then. Unfortunately, Ishkuria’s Decree consumes a lot of resources to run and cannot be used often, so we really can’t give you much longer than that. Besides, we aren’t expecting you to produce any Masterful or even Refined spells with so little time. You just need to gain a rudimentary grasp on your new element and do something useful with it.”

“How will our performance be evaluated?” Remlat suddenly asked, speaking for the first time since arriving on Tanarill.

Along with Percy and his host, the two-cored Inimit was probably the participant with the most at stake during this event, as his potential qualification to the elimination phase would be decided here.

“A good question,” the demigod said, before elaborating. “Once you select your affinity, the entire flowerbed will enter an illusionary state, allowing you to wield the new element and the rest of us to watch. Your performance will be evaluated by the Decree itself. As soon as your time is up, a variable number of flowers will change colour to indicate your score. You will be judged based on your proficiency with the new mana type, the complexity and effectiveness of your spell, and also the affinity you have selected. Composite elements will be rewarded more generously than common ones, but are much harder to get used to with so little time, so only pick them if you feel confident.”

Percy carefully listened to the Clear mage’s instructions while considering his own choices. Picking a composite affinity was a no-brainer, but he would have plenty of time to discuss with Micky and Kassorith which one to choose, since they would apparently be the last ones tested.

It also sounded like a more elaborate spell would receive more points, but not if it was just a flashy trick with no real purpose. Of course, Percy already had a few ideas on how to win this thing, so he allowed himself to relax slightly, feeling a lot better about the contest than he had before reaching the flowerbed.

Shifting his attention to other matters, he couldn’t help but take control of his host’s mouth to ask: “do these flowers have any special alchemical uses?”

The demigod creased his brow, having clearly not expected such an off-topic question. Still, he collected himself soon enough. “Not that I know of. The flowers themselves aren’t special: they’re just a bunch of mundane plants, really. It’s only the soil that’s enchanted, and the Decree only interacts with the flowers by temporarily changing the colour of their petals. I’m not the one responsible for maintaining this place, but I’m pretty sure that the species of the flowers don’t even matter, and that they’re replaced pretty often.”

Percy nodded thoughtfully, though he was slightly disappointed that even a titaness at the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage hadn’t managed to interact with the plants in a more profound manner.

Oblivious to his thoughts, their guide spoke again. “If there are no more questions, let’s begin.”

Chapter 658: Ishkuria’s Decree (2)

The first participant to be tested was a male Ollorian with an ice affinity who had ranked last in the previous event. Both of his legs were half the normal length and were missing a segment, making even walking a challenge for the disfigured mage, though he could still move just fine using his magic.

Riding a floating chunk of ice to the centre of Ishkuria’s Decree, he plopped down gracelessly atop the bare patch of dirt that the demigod had indicated earlier. Closing his eyes, he clearly connected with the enchanted flowerbed in some way, causing the dancing petals to converge towards him. A colourful screen obscured the Ollorian’s malformed frame as the vibrant hues of the flowers still planted in the dirt grew dull.

The very laws that governed reality shifted around the contestant subtly.

Even Percy, whose host was currently standing dozens of metres away from the disfigured mage, felt Kassorith’s mana core grow more foreign and distant, almost as if the organ no longer belonged to either of them. The mana inside it moved lethargically, behaving in a new and unfamiliar manner.

Percy couldn’t exactly feel the core assume a new affinity: nor was it supposed to work like that for anyone but the person actively using the Decree: so he guessed that it was just a side-effect.

Ignoring the changes to his borrowed body, he focused his senses on the Ollorian. The former ice user wasn’t allowed to choose any affinity that overlapped with his own, so he would have to pick some combination of fire, lightning, or earth.

The demigod had warned them about the difficulties involved with selecting composite mana types, yet Percy expected everyone to ignore that advice. His fellow participants were all prideful people that had already mastered either rare or composite affinities, so he just couldn’t imagine anybody willing to settle for a common one.

Especially with so much at stake. The event was worth a lot of points, meaning that even those near the bottom of the rankings could potentially climb to the top half of the group to earn another reward if they played their cards right.

Sure enough, the Ollorian decided to go with lava. Lightning mana was arguably the most erratic among his remaining options, thus causing him to avoid it like the plague.

'Hmmm… if we ignore the rules of the event and other personal considerations, water and earth are objectively the easiest common elements to master, so mud would be the safest combination overall. Anyone who is eligible for it will have a huge advantage,' Percy realized, fully aware that his host wouldn't be able to choose that.

On the flipside, some participants might wish to forgo a reward in this year's competition for the opportunity to experience a more challenging element, since that could potentially save them a lot of time after they attained divinity.

Over the next few minutes, the Ollorian struggled to figure out how to channel mana through his arms and manifest orange blobs of molten rock inside his hands. For better or worse, the participants didn't need to clear any new mana channels, as Ishkuria's Decree seemed to take care of that by granting them enough pathways to match what they had cleared for their normal affinities.

In Kassorith's case, that would mean a fully cleared and tempered network, theoretically allowing Percy to activate his boosting art immediately: something that he obviously had no intention of taking advantage of.

'We still have to decide how much we are willing to reveal,' Micky pointed out.

The Huehuan was right. Percy was no longer worried about winning the event, though he still wasn't sure whether he wanted to study his opponents and try to beat them by doing the bare minimum or go all out, just to be safe.

On one hand, he'd rather not draw too much unnecessary attention to his host. On the other, he didn't want to risk losing to Remlat by holding back. Besides, what was anyone going to accuse him of? Being too talented at mastering new affinities?

‘Might as well give them a show they’ll never forget then. Letting loose at least once in this damn tournament is going to feel so cathartic…’

Oblivious to Percy’s thoughts, the Ollorian worked tirelessly to produce something useful with his new affinity, though he clearly wasn’t doing as well as he might have liked. Despite the passive resistance to higher temperatures that came with his lava core, the disfigured man had managed to repeatedly scorch his palms, the ground around his feet turning into an expanding puddle of red goop that threatened the surrounding flowers.

The short mage had initially tried to mould his mana into delicate constructs, though the task had proven too difficult. Giving up on that, he had resorted to launching orbs of condensed lava as far as possible for a while. He had done his best to maximize the speed, size, and range of his projectiles, but the spheres of liquid earth had yet to travel more than a couple dozen metres before bursting into a sizzling rain that scorched the unfortunate flowers beneath them.

‘Well… all of this is fake anyway,’ Percy reminded himself.

It would take some concentration, but he knew that he could use his Sage’s Pond to peel away the illusion, uncovering the true layer of reality hidden underneath Ishkuria’s magic. The Ollorian’s palms weren’t actually injured, and the flowers that he had seemingly incinerated were still intact.

Even his lava affinity was obviously a charade, the core in his sternum still full with his original ice mana. The disfigured man would probably be able to feel that too with the slightest modicum of effort, though he clearly saw no reason to break himself out of the spell.

“I’m a bit surprised he’s so bad at it,” a female Maradorian next to Kassorith muttered in a hushed voice.

“That’s probably because you’ve forgotten what your own affinity felt like when you first awakened your core as a child,” Azalotheen replied.

The frog-woman didn’t seem to take any offense at her compatriot’s comment. Everyone knew that Azalotheen had acquired his second core recently, so his memories of mastering a brand-new mana type were far fresher than anyone else in the group.

Percy couldn't help but recall his own experiences. He may have registered several Masterful spells with his main body by now: and even an Extreme one: but he hadn't forgotten how difficult it had been to perfect his first few Crude spells as a teenager.

Shaping his soul mana into a dagger or his pure mana into a staff had taken weeks of practice. Micky had originally struggled to make use of his air and ice affinities too, and every time Percy had possessed a host with a new mana type had been another challenge.

The void tournament's participants weren't children of course. They were all talented mages who had already mastered one: or in some cases, multiple: affinities, and their higher grades also afforded them with far better control over their mana.

Still, twenty-five minutes was too little time.

Eventually, the world shifted back to its original state, every trace of lava mana, burnt flesh or scorched plants vanishing without a trace. At some point, the Ollorian had given up on finesse, unleashing all of his mana in a single, massive wave that he had only barely managed to control the trajectory of.

The spell had destroyed everything in its path, carving a deep, wide trench that had stretched for over forty metres before being filled with magma. The devastation that he had unleashed had admittedly been impressive, but he had owed his performance mostly to the raw power that had come with his Blue grade than true skill.

Even that superheated river of destruction had now disappeared from the magical garden, the flowers that it had incinerated having returned to their original locations.

Percy and his host held their breath, as did the other participants, waiting for the results. Nobody cared that much about the Ollorian's performance specifically, but everyone naturally wanted to understand how the event worked.

A few moments later, the flowers around the disfigured man changed colours, their petals assuming various shades of red, orange, and brown. The field of transformed flowers stretched for thirty or so metres in every direction, the diameter of the new circle spanning nearly a third of the flowerbed, though its area only amounted to about a tenth.

“Fourteen thousand three hundred and forty-five flowers,” the demigod announced, sending a visible wave of confusion rippling through the group of participants.

“Sir, do you mind giving us an idea of what that means?” one of the Inimits asked.

The Clear mage shrugged, his wings stretching and folding with the motion. “There are a hundred and eight thousand flowers in the garden, so your colleague has managed to affect around thirteen percent of them,” he explained, confirming Percy’s earlier estimates.

Upon seeing that the mortals were still unsure of how good that performance was, the demigod added, “most mages affect somewhere between five and ten percent of the flowers on their first attempt, with anything above that being considered exceptional. Increasing one’s score gets exponentially harder with each percentage point, since twenty percent is the threshold for a Crude spell, forty for Refined, and sixty for Masterful. Obviously, doing that well would typically require selecting an affinity that one is already familiar with. Picking an element you already possess is a waste of time, so this typically only applies to deities who use Ishkuria’s Decree repeatedly, to accelerate the acquisition of a new concept.”

Percy couldn’t help but scratch the back of his host’s head, reevaluating slightly how much he was willing to dazzle his fellow participants.

‘Showing off a little should still be fine, but a Crude or Refined spell is going to be plenty. Let’s not go overboard…’ he decided.

The demigod called the next person: the moss-bearded Aflegian: to the circle. One after the other, the participants selected composite affinities that they had never wielded before, trying to get used to their new elements as fast as possible to win the event.

The Clear mage had said that anything above ten percent was considered exceptional, but the reality was that almost everyone managed to reach that fairly easily, with most of them converting somewhere between twelve and seventeen percent of the flowers.

‘I guess they aren’t considered elites for nothing,’ Percy reasoned.

A few contestants did even better than that, and Percy didn't miss the pattern. Every Maradorian managed to affect over eighteen percent of the flowers, with Azalotheen being the first to cross the threshold of a Crude spell by converting twenty-one percent of them.

It wasn't too surprising. The first frog-person to undertake the test had asked the demigod whether they were allowed to select a mana type that they had a secondary affinity for, and the Clear mage had confirmed that it wasn't against the rules.

The Maradorians didn't have any real experience in wielding their secondary elements, but they were at least used to singling them out as they converted ambient mana to their primary affinities, so they weren't starting from scratch.

Some of them, like Azalotheen, had secondary affinities to rare elements that they couldn't select directly, but they still had a minor advantage over their peers. Of course, Azalotheen himself happened to possess an actual second core too.

Despite not being allowed to pick either of his true mana types, he had undergone the process of mastering a new affinity twice, so he was obviously quite experienced in applying his broader understanding of mana to new elements.

Sadly, that also applied to Remlat, who had been the second person in the group to cast a Crude spell and convert twenty percent of the flowers.

'It doesn't matter,' Micky said. 'If it was any other event, this would have been worrisome, but we've got this one in the bag.'

Percy nodded internally, knowing that his own experience vastly eclipsed anyone else's.

He was most impressed by Zurvanai, actually, since the female Denyte was the only non-Maradorian mage with a single core to convert nineteen percent of the flowers, surpassing some of the frog-people. She was only two spots behind Remlat which, coupled with her previous lead over the Inimit, should guarantee her the qualification to the elimination phase even though she had really gotten quite unlucky with this event.

‘Good for her,’ Percy thought.

Zurvanai was the one most deserving of the spot to the third round, so he would genuinely feel guilty if she missed it because of his presence. Remlat, on the other hand, already had his second Blue core, so he could afford to skip a year.

Regardless of Percy’s feelings about the other contestants, his host slithered to the centre of the flowerbed, about to commence his own evaluation. It was finally time to end the second special event, and with it, the entire group phase of the void tournament.

And Percy intended to end it all with a bang.

Chapter 659: Ishkuria’s Decree (3)

Percy felt his connection to Kassorith’s core weaken for the eighteenth time today, though the magical dissociation was even more pronounced now that it was the Thess’kalan’s turn to meditate in the centre of the flowerbed. The real organ could still be accessed with enough effort, though it would be like trying to claw Kassorith’s metal mana out of a pit of tar.

In exchange for the temporary loss, a new mana core had formed in his sternum, layered over the original, like a blank slate waiting to be written on. For a second, Percy thought that it had defaulted to a pure affinity, but he quickly realized that he was wrong.

Like rare elements, pure mana could only be accessed by a god who had possessed it before their ascension, and this Ishkuria lady didn’t seem to fit that description. She clearly hadn’t mastered the concepts associated with the pure affinity, so her Decree couldn’t simulate them.

Kassorith’s fake core was currently useless, and would remain so until he made his selection. Five choices presented themselves to the Thess’kalan and his spectral companions in the form of faint ideas that tugged at the edge of their consciousness.

‘Interesting… the Decree isn’t stopping us from picking earth or lightning. Only the rules of the event are,’ Percy noted, though they had already discussed this and decided which affinity to choose.

Kassorith took the lead, exacerbating the playful nature of his mana to introduce the air element into his temporary core. Once the first affinity was in place, he willed the erratic motes inside the spherical organ to slow down, adding the water element as well, in a manner similar to what Micky had experienced decades ago.

Two conflicting flows collided inside the organ, slowing each other further and forcing the mana in Kassorith's sternum to a standstill, thus giving birth to the ice affinity.

Percy was confident that he could win the event with pretty much any composite mana type that he wanted, but he'd rather not take any chances. It was better to go with the affinity that he had the most experience with. As a bonus, air and water were the only two elements that Kassorith didn't possess in either of his cores, so the Thess'kalan had been rather open to this choice.

Was it a waste of an opportunity to not go for a new affinity?

Not really. Percy could always use his bloodline to possess a host with whatever mana type he wished to experience, so this hadn't been a factor in his decision at all.

'Is it me, or does the ice mana feel a little off?' Micky: the resident expert in the subject: asked.

'It does,' Percy agreed.

Their fake mana core was a poor imitation of the real thing. The air mana moved more rapidly but less wildly than it was supposed to, and the water mana didn't feel nearly as heavy or calm as it should.

Wherever the affinities interacted, the resulting composite element diverged even further from its true nature. Percy could tell that any ice they manifested using this mana would be brittle and less cold, forming much weaker spells.

'Okay… I suppose we owe the others an apology. Maybe they weren't complete idiots for failing to produce anything better than a Crude spell,' he admitted. 'I wonder why the Decree is so flawed.'

There was no doubt that Ishkuria was a master of the five common affinities and all twenty-six of their combinations, so the shortcomings of the illusion probably had to do with how difficult it was to simulate a mana core in another's body.

Maybe the titaness simply didn't know what composite elements were supposed to feel like to a mortal, since she had only possessed a simple water affinity in the Colour realm. Or perhaps, it had been so long since her apotheosis that she didn't remember what a mana core felt like at all.

Whatever the case, the value of Ishkuria's Decree instantly decreased in Percy's eyes. Experiencing a new affinity through the illusion was a poor substitute for possessing a real core with that element or meditating near an Elemental Source.

Of course, he still understood why the Void Hand treasured this place so much. Practicing inside the flowerbed was ultimately better than nothing. For most people, it was their only chance to ever come in contact with new affinities, and it had the advantage of simulating a grand total of fifteen different elements. Even a peak faction like the Void Hand might not control that many Elemental Sources.

In any case, the Decree's shortcomings weren't enough to stump Percy and Micky.

The Lone Wanderer's aspects allowed the barrier separating their memories to collapse, causing the human and crow constellations inside their shared mindscape to blend into a cloaked figure.

Kassorith took a backseat in his own body, content to just watch as his spectral guests took care of the event. The Thess'kalan merely had to relax and pay attention to what Percy and Micky did, memorizing the feeling for when he became a deity.

Using pre-casting, the Lone Wanderer adjusted the flows of air and water mana inside his fake mana core, tweaking the properties of the ice. Splitting the stream into two, he allowed chilling liquids and gases to gush through his host's arms, expelling them from his palms.

His first attempt was a complete mess, though he quickly learned from the experience and compensated for the peculiarities of the fake organ as he repeated the process a second and a third time. Little by little, he grew more accustomed to the altered variants of his ice mana, putting together a spell that should win him the competition.

About halfway through his preparations, he caught a glimpse of his fellow participants' stunned expressions. Even the demigod's beak was hanging loose, as the Clear mage couldn't have possibly imagined stumbling upon such a talented contestant today.

The Lone Wanderer suppressed a chuckle as his senses briefly brushed over Remlat's grimace. The poor fool had likely thought that his earlier performance had guaranteed him the victory over Kassorith.

'Well, tough luck… try again next year buddy.'

Long before the Thess'kalan's time was up, the Lone Wanderer felt that he had regained a sufficient grasp over the flawed mana to cast something powerful. Splitting the ice into dozens of distinct streams, he converted some to liquids or gases, leaving the rest as solids. He even applied all sorts of additional effects like rotations or compressions to further augment their effects.

Channelling the magical flows through his host's arms, he assembled the intricate spell in his palms before releasing it. A series of spinning shards of ice shot through the garden, propelled by bursts of compressed air and jets of freezing water.

The projectiles travelled for over eighty metres before drilling deep holes into the ground. Percy and Micky could have sent them much farther, but they hadn't wanted the spell to exit the boundary of Ishkuria's Decree, in case the flowerbed failed to evaluate it.

'This should do,' Percy thought as he separated his mind from Micky's again.

Had they wanted to go all out, they could have done even better than this. The spell they had just unleashed was nothing more than their old Frozen Shards: something that they had created over a decade ago.

With the additional experience they had accumulated since then, coupled with a Blue's control and reserves, they could have definitely elevated the barrage to the Masterful tier even without using soul mana or magiscript. However, there was no need for anything flashier than this.

If anything, Percy would have preferred to water the spell down further, though he wasn't sure which aspects would be safe to cut without making the resulting attack way too basic.

Percy waited for the garden to acknowledge their performance, though he quickly discovered that there was no way to end the session early. Perhaps flying outside the garden would do the trick, but he didn't want to risk getting disqualified.

Instead, he decided to wait for Kassorith's time to run out, even going as far as to fire the icy barrage a couple more times close to the end to make sure that the flowerbed registered it.

Eventually, a series of scattered petals converged at the Thess'kalan's location once again, a colourful cyclone spinning rapidly around him as the illusion finally got lifted. Everyone probably understood by now that Kassorith had blown the others out of the water, though they all still waited patiently for the garden to declare the results.

A few moments later, a carpet of pale and light blue flowers rippled outwards from the centre of the Decree, stretching all the way to where the other participants were standing and beyond.

The colourful wave extended for thirty… forty… fifty metres in every direction without showing any sign of stopping. Only after crossing the sixty-metre mark did it finally begin to slow down, eventually coming to a halt about seventy metres away from the centre of the flowerbed.

"Forty-four thousand six hundred and thirty-six flowers… or… over forty-one percent!" the demigod announced, his voice shaky.

Chapter 660: Calamity affinity (1)

Several hours earlier

"You'd better not make a habit of this, Thelenius. You know damn well how I feel about lending my Decree to the tournament," Ishkuria spat while glaring at the younger god's puppet.

Thelenius was an Inimit deity like her, but he had been born on a different planet, so he couldn't directly set foot on Tanarill. Gods were able to form a second connection to the world they attained divinity on, but Thelenius had done that elsewhere too.

The enchanted machine that Thelenius was operating appeared identical to him, the liquid alloy perfectly mimicking his toned body down to the last brown feather and vibrant strip of cloth.

Ishkuria rarely used such puppets, since she wasn't fond of travelling. Examining those of her guests reminded her that the latest models were a hundred times more advanced than the old heaps of junk that had been all the rage a million years ago.

The new ones could share their senses and respond to their owner's movements in real time from as far as the radius of an entire solar system away, making them among the most practical tools for gods to visit planets that they weren't otherwise welcome on. It was no wonder they were so popular among greater springs.

Unfortunately, the person-shaped devices still had major shortcomings when it came to more complex and demanding tasks, such as accurately conveying the concepts one could experience while meditating near an Elemental Source or using a Ring of Sacrilege. It could be done: and it often was: but it was a far cry from doing those things in person.

Oblivious to her thoughts, Thelenius bowed slightly in apology, causing Ishkuria's gaze to soften. She knew that this hadn't been entirely his fault. His three colleagues had pressured the younger Inimit into demanding Ishkuria's flowerbed for the competition, so she felt a little bad admonishing him.

"Lady Ishkuria, I don't understand why you are so opposed to letting the Void Hand's most talented mortals benefit from your masterpiece," Hellenae, the green-skinned Maradorian deity croaked through her own puppet.

She, along with Thelenius, Forbat, and Dokorin: the Ollorian and Denyte representatives respectively: were the current organizers of the void tournament. All four were at the peak of the Self-Discovery stage: a respectable level anywhere else in the universe, but mere children in Ishkuria's eyes.

The alliance had plenty of deities far more powerful than them, but it was customary to pawn off the responsibility to younger gods who didn't get a say, as their leaders had better things to spend their time on.

The divine group was currently sitting in a meeting room inside Ishkuria's Jade Palace, though the titaness was the only one physically present. Resting leisurely on their shimmering thrones, they were watching the contest unfold on the other side of the planet through a screen on the wall.

"That's only because you didn't pay attention the last time I explained myself, Hellenae. My Decree is only operational for a few days every century or so, and I'd much rather reserve that precious window for our gods: who actually need it."

"With all due respect, Lady Ishkuria!" Dokorin slammed his fists on the smooth table, showing no actual respect. Had the little prick been here with his own body, he wouldn't have been nearly this bold. Thankfully, the puppet didn't possess enough strength to damage her furniture, though it still sent a faint tremor across the colossal tree.

"As a founding faction of the Void Hand, your people are expected to share some of their resources with the rest of us. We all are. I understand the urge to put your kin first, but the future of the alliance must be taken into consideration," he explained in a nasal tone, as if he were lecturing a toddler rather than a titaness several times older than him. "Those accursed Moirai are already close to producing their first seven-elemental deities, and we don't have nearly enough candidates to match them."

Ishkuria couldn't help but roll her eyes at the short god's outburst. Luckily for him, she was more annoyed by their antics than genuinely angry. In fact, she had to stop herself from laughing at the ridiculous display of Dokorin's glowing red hair fluttering with every sentence he had uttered in indignation.

"Spare me the theatrics, child. I'm not speaking out of blind nationalism. When I said 'our gods', I naturally meant everyone from across the alliance: not just Inimits. I just happen to think that my Decree is wasted on mortals. Let me ask you this: how many of them do you expect to attain divinity?"

She pointed at the screen with her beak. Coincidentally, it was a male Denyte like Dokorin who was currently competing, though the mortal's hair sported a milky-white colour, indicative of a steam affinity.

"One? Maybe two?" It was Forbat's puppet who humoured her question, coming to his colleague's aid. His flawless skin and handsome appearance looked out of place on an Ollorian. It was such a pity that nothing short of divine ascension could mend his people's deformities. It was admittedly an effective remedy, and it even came with the unexpected benefit of their gods generating more Wiseman's Dust

than other races, but this method was tragically out of reach for the overwhelming majority of their population.

“Aye… one or two.” Ishkuria nodded. “If we’re lucky, that is. Our elites are several times more likely to succeed than the average demigod, but most will still fail. Even for the rare few who manage to form their internal world, experiencing new affinities won’t mean much before they enter the Elemental Acquisition stage. How well will they even remember their time in my flowerbed hundreds of millennia from now?”

‘I would have been much happier sharing my Decree if you allowed them to form composite second cores, but you bastards want all of them to get a rare element,’ she thought, though she kept that part to herself.

It wasn’t like she didn’t understand their reasoning. There was no known method to acquire rare affinities after attaining divinity, so obtaining them early was mathematically a smarter investment, as it gave their new gods a higher ceiling.

Unfortunately, it also meant that the Void Hand had no mortals with three or more common elements, slowing Ishkuria’s research down to a crawl. It prevented her from conducting certain experiments with calamity affinities that would allow her to upgrade her Decree and offer more opportunities to everyone.

In that regard, the titaness was quite envious of the Moirai, who were all born with their second cores. The bald fuckers produced plenty of elites with one or two rare affinities, but that didn’t stop them from having countless people with three or four common elements as well.

Ishkuria’s scathing words shut the younger gods up, though the damage was already done. The demigod guiding the mortals had activated the Decree, so the clock was already ticking. As soon as the contest was over, they’d have to get as many gods as possible to use it, before it closed again a few days later.

Clicking her beak in irritation, the titaness leaned back on her throne, resting her head on the polished, gemlike piece of wood, content to watch the show for now. Most of her attention, however, was focused on the life concepts oozing out of the walls and furniture of her Palace.

She had carved her residence into the trunk of the first-generation sapling that had taken root on Tanarill eons ago, allowing her to take advantage of the fragmented Elemental Source.

Having already mastered every common affinity and all their combinations, Ishkuria's next goal was to acquire a rare element: on paper at least. The third major stage of the Concept realm remained hypothetical, but it was what most of her peers spent their days working on.

Personally, she felt that it was best to let the next generation of gods: the chosen few who had begun their divine journey with one or more rare affinities: worry about that. They were far more likely to succeed, since they already had some experience with such mana types.

This was also why she had settled for meditation inside a mere sapling of the World Tree, rather than one of the complete Elemental Sources under the Void Hand's control. Well, the fact that the mountain-sized plant was located on her own planet made everything more convenient as well.

That was not to say that Ishkuria had retired.

She still had plenty to contribute to the Inimits in particular, and the alliance in general. She felt that their gods and mortals had only scratched the surface of what was possible with common affinities, and that her Decree could still be improved further. Hell, one day, she might even figure out how to cast another one.

Pushing those thoughts aside, she tried to enjoy the show for now.

'Hmm? Almost everyone has converted more than ten percent of the flowers. I suppose we have a decent crop this year.'