Wanderer 661

Chapter 661: Calamity affinity (2)

Ishkuria wasn't surprised that the Maradorians and those with the Void Decree had easily dominated the contest. Despite her protests, this wasn't the first time the organizers had talked her into opening her garden up for the tournament. It was a well-established fact that having any experience with multiple affinities gave the participants a major advantage.

Seeing Remlat cross the threshold of a Crude spell caused the corners of her beak to curl up. The younger Inimit was slightly behind the two-cored Maradorian from earlier, though the other gods had informed the titaness that Remlat was far ahead of the frog-person in the main leaderboard, filling her with pride.

Perhaps, the child would even surpass Ishkuria one day, becoming one of the Void Hand's six-elemental deities: the exact level of their current leaders. Sadly, he wouldn't be able to acquire a seventh element, since his first core contained a composite affinity already.

At most, it would allow Remlat to skip the early parts of the Elemental Acquisition stage. It wasn't nothing, but the young Inimit would never become one of the promised champions that would hopefully keep the Moirai monsters of tomorrow at bay. By the time he reached the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage: assuming he ever did: a six-elemental deity wouldn't be valued nearly as highly as they were today.

'Such a waste. If he didn't have a rare affinity to start with, they should have just allowed him to pick a second composite one. I would have made him my disciple.'

Annoyed that she had been robbed of yet another potential research subject, Ishkuria shook her head, resuming watching the competition. Eventually, another mortal caught her attention.

"Who is the young woman with the time affinity?" she asked the other gods.

It was unusual for somebody with only a single core and no secondary affinity to nearly touch the threshold of a Crude spell in the contest, yet the female Denyte had done precisely that, even surpassing a couple of Maradorians in the process.

“Her name is Zurvanai. Despite this being her first time in the tournament, she won every fight and was previously the favourite to finish at the top of her group,” Thelenius helpfully explained. “For a while, I thought that Remlat was going to displace her during this event due to his advantage, but it looks like she’s going to barely stay ahead of him with this kind of performance.”

“Zurvanai?” Ishkuria asked, furrowing her brow. She was quite familiar with Denyte naming traditions, so the meaning hadn’t escaped her notice. “Is she Lord Zurvan’s…?”

The younger deity nodded, confirming her guess. “It’s one of the reasons I agreed to bother you with our request.”

“Interesting…” the titaness muttered under her breath. “Dokorin, it looks like your people have truly lucked out with the girl. Please convey my warmest congratulations to Lord Zurvan the next time you see him. Perhaps, granting this batch of mortals access to my Decree won’t be a complete waste. If the stars align, this young lady might one day become one of those seven-elemental deities we were just discussing.”

“Of course, Lady Ishkuria.” The Denyte god cupped his fists politely, his previous rudeness gone without a trace.

There was nothing like a couple of compliments and some mild bootlicking to butter a person up, though Ishkuria didn’t mind lowering herself like this. Not only was the mortal girl genuinely talented, but Lord Zurvan also happened to be one of the few figures in the alliance Ishkuria respected.

Slouching back on her jade throne, the titaness’ gaze returned to the screen, through which she watched the second-to-last participant undergo the test. He was a male Ollorian with a light affinity. He wasn’t bad, but he ultimately failed to keep up with the front-runners.

Upon realizing that the final contestant was just a Thess’kalan, Ishkuria lost any interest she may have had in the competition. While she was admittedly a little curious about the mortal’s ruby-coloured scales and whatever circumstances had allowed a member of a weaker faction to make it this far into the tournament, it wasn’t enough for her to waste time observing him.

Even the organizers of the tournament: whose job was to oversee the competition: appeared to share that view. The three outsiders withdrew their senses from the puppets without so much as bidding Ishkuria farewell, causing the exteriors of the devices to melt and shift back to their original, smooth textures.

Only Thelenius stayed in the room, purely out of respect towards her.

Ishkuria was about to excuse the younger deity and turn off the screen, when the Thess'kalan began working with the illusory ice mana that he had selected. The sheer ease with which he wielded a composite element that he clearly hadn't possessed a moment ago caused the titaness to pause, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Even Thelenius: who had looked like he'd been trying to find the right words to extricate himself just now: kept watching the demonstration in stunned silence as the mysterious Thess'kalan continued to dazzle his audience.

Admittedly, the scaled man did fumble his initial attempts slightly, but his control over the ice improved noticeably with every passing second, to the point that Ishkuria was starting to question whether he had violated the rules of the contest and picked an element that he already possessed.

Thelenius shook his head, probably guessing her thoughts. "Everything should be above board. Had he cheated, the tournament's system would have flagged him already. It's hard to tell what his original affinity is through the screen, but I seem to recall that it was metal."

Tentatively accepting the explanation, Ishkuria continued observing the strange Thess'kalan. About a third of the way in, the mortal casually crossed the threshold of a Crude spell, and it didn't seem like he was even done yet.

The titaness's fascination with the man reached its apex a few minutes later when he finally stopped practicing and unleashed a powerful and elegant volley of spinning shards that dug deep into the soil near the edge of the flowerbed.

The resolution of the feed left much to be desired, and it was impossible to scan the contestants' mana cores through the transmission, so there were still several details that Ishkuria had failed to make out. However, she was pretty sure that the Thess'kalan had incorporated three distinct variants of ice mana

in his spell: liquid, gas, and solid: which was an advanced trick that only experienced users of the affinity were capable of.

'Did he meditate near an Elemental Source or something?' she couldn't help but ask herself. 'No… even if he had done that, his performance is still quite impressive.'

Ishkuria had no idea where the Thess'kalan's talent in manipulating new affinities had come from. He might owe it to a mutation, a bloodline, or something else entirely, but it didn't really matter. Whatever the case, his skills would be extremely useful to her.

After firing the barrage, the mortal didn't bother training any longer, clearly aware that this was already enough for him to win the competition. However, he did repeat his demonstration a couple more times before his turn was over, probably to ensure that the flowerbed registered it correctly: though Ishkuria knew that was unnecessary.

By the time the demigod declared the Thess'kalan's victory, an excited glint had found its way into the titaness' eyes.

"Thelenius… mind doing me a small favour?"

"Lady Ishkuria?" The younger god shifted nervously as soon as he was done picking the bottom of his beak off the polished floor, probably realizing that she was about to request something troublesome.

"Delay the mortals' return by twenty minutes. I wish to talk to the Thess'kalan in private," she demanded.

The male Inimit frowned. "Lady Ishkuria, he has just climbed to the top of his group before the eyes of the entire alliance… There's a lot of attention on him, and you know that any unauthorized contact with the participants is strictly forbidden."

The titaness scoffed. "Oh, don't give me that crap! Make it fifteen minutes then. Say that there was a malfunction with the teleportation runes. Nobody will know."

“This…” The weaker deity sounded somewhat apprehensive.

“If anybody finds out, just pin the blame on me,” Ishkuria insisted with a shrug. “There are only so many gods in the alliance who would dare complain to my face, and I’m willing to bet my left wing that none of them would bother with something this dumb.”

“As you wish.” Thelenius slouched in resignation. “What am I to do with the rest?”

“Entertain them. Keep them busy. Treat them to a fancy meal. I really don’t care,” the titaness said. “Oh, but make sure that you don’t displease the girl. The last thing we need is to piss Lord Zurvan off.”

The young god swallowed hard, though he ultimately kept whatever words of protest were undoubtedly swirling inside his handsome little head to himself. Not wasting any time, he promptly retracted his senses from the puppet like the others had done before him, already off to make the appropriate arrangements to fulfil Ishkuria’s request.

The titaness herself lingered on the throne for a few seconds longer, crossing her legs as she considered how to best approach this matter.

‘The others won’t be happy if they find out that I influenced a mortal’s affinity selection, but there’s no helping that. I’ll never stumble upon a more talented research subject to test that on. Besides, it’s not like I’m going to force him. If anything, I’m doing him a favour by giving him more options.’

She sighed. No matter how she tried to justify it, she knew that she was about to ruffle a few feathers. But should the mortal agree to her request, it would all be worth it.

Chapter 662: Calamity affinity (3)

‘Micky, do you think we overdid it?’ Percy asked.

‘Probably,’ the Huehuan replied.

The group of contestants was currently flying back to their landing zone so that they could return to the stadium, and Percy hadn’t missed the odd looks some of them were giving his host.

Thankfully, most participants were too busy contemplating their gains from the event to care about what anyone else was doing, Kassorith included. It would be a long time before any of them forged an internal world, and longer still before they were ready to start acquiring new elements, but they could still draw inspiration from this experience to improve their understanding of their current affinities.

Unfortunately, the small subset of people staring at the Thess'kalan included the demigod, which Percy didn't appreciate.

He honestly hadn't intended to show off as much as he had. He'd aimed for a score of about thirty percent, which would have placed his host comfortably above everyone else, yet without looking too outlandish.

Granted, casting a Refined spell had arguably been a poor way of accomplishing that, but Phoebe's Decree had only classified Frozen Shards as such when cast by a Yellow. Percy had been afraid that the Void Hand's standards would be stricter, or that the tournament's organizers would expect more from a talented Blue, and he hadn't wanted to accidentally lose to Remlat by being overly cautious.

Evidently, the standards of spell classification across the universe were a little more rigid than expected.

Perhaps, Percy should have watched the Inimit carefully and tried to make his own demonstration just slightly more impressive than the winged man's, but comparing spells of different affinities wasn't easy, so he'd ultimately decided to err on the side of caution.

'It's fine. Kassorith is just a genius at mastering new elements. Any other explanation is too crazy to imagine,' Percy told himself.

He was snapped out of his thoughts when a figure broke off from the rest of the group, flying up to the Thess'kalan. To Percy's great shock, it was actually Remlat.

'Strange. I wonder what he wants,' Micky said.

'Shit,' Percy cursed internally, suddenly feeling quite tense. 'I imagine he's pissed off that we've just snatched the qualification right out of his hands.'

Outwards, he projected the calmest, most amiable expression he could muster. He would have tried smiling too, but Kassorith's lack of any teeth besides his venomous fangs would have made it creepy.

"Congratulations. That was quite the performance back there," Remlat said, not sounding very angry. "Right up until you started practicing with your ice mana, I'd genuinely thought that I'd made it to the next round. Talk about a surprise."

"Thanks," Percy said, awkwardly scratching the back of his host's scaled hood. "This whole group phase has been quite competitive. I'm sorry that you're going to miss the rest. It's obvious to everyone that you belong there."

The male Inimit chuckled, bumping Kassorith on the shoulder with enough strength to nearly knock him off his flying greatsword. Percy had seen the playful strike coming thanks to his Greater Foresight, but he hadn't detected any hostile intent, so he'd opted not to dodge.

"Don't sweat it. I've reached the elimination phase many times before, and I expect to do so many more before Violet. There aren't even that many rewards left that I'm too eager to earn. Nowadays, I mostly join the tournament for the prestige and to hone myself against powerful opponents, so I'll just treat the next few weeks as a rare vacation before next year's regional tournament starts."

Percy exhaled in relief, feeling quite glad that the two-cored mage didn't seem to harbour a grudge. Not that he had any reason to fear a random mortal on the other side of the cosmos, but he didn't want to make new enemies over nothing. Especially since Remlat might one day climb to the upper echelons of a peak faction.

"Say, how competitive is the next round?" Percy asked, unable to control himself. The Inimit seemed like a nice person outside of the competition, so Percy figured that he might as well get his opinion on this. "Do you think I stand a chance at qualifying for the Void Decree with my current strength?"

Remlat regarded him carefully before shrugging. "It varies. Our group was tougher than most," he said, his eyes briefly brushing over Zurvanai. "Usually, there's only a couple of people around Azalotheen's level, so your odds of making it through one more battle aren't zero. However, there are a couple of people even stronger than me and Zurvanai out there: at least until she gets her second core: so it'll all come down to the luck of the draw."

Percy frowned. He didn't like what he was hearing, though he had expected that.

"Hey, don't look so gloomy!" Remlat bumped him again, albeit more gently than before. "You've got all the time in the world to get your new core. Even if you end up in a bad matchup this year, just keep trying until you get lucky. Someone like you can definitely reach the top eight after a few attempts, and then you'll have everything you need to compete with the best of us more easily. Hell, it took me over a decade before I made it that far myself."

Percy nodded, doing his best to appear unconcerned. The truth was that Remlat's attempt at consolation wasn't very applicable to him or his host who only had a single shot at claiming the Decree in the foreseeable future, but he kept that to himself.

'At least we've earned two more rewards and managed to get another major planet marked,' Micky reminded him. 'Third core or not, this won't be a wasted trip.'

'Indeed. The Penitent's Decree is already a massive haul, and we even managed to upgrade our Instantaneous Formation. The special events were pretty valuable experiences too,' Percy agreed.

He'd actually been wondering why the organizers had placed them in such strange situations. The first event in particular had felt somewhat odd, because only Kassorith and Falanor had even possessed the means to directly cleanse the beasts on Spiralis B-3. The other contestants had had no choice but to slaughter the infected creatures in the most efficient way that they could come up with while resisting the corruption.

The purpose of that had likely been to shock the talented Blues out of their complacency.

Becoming a god involved a lot more than raw power, so the leaders of the alliance probably wanted their young prodigies to identify their shortcomings and start addressing them early.

This had all worked pretty well for Percy, who didn't stand out as much as he would have liked in pure fighting strength, but whose skillset had proven versatile enough to rank first in his group. One might argue that he had simply been lucky that both events had suited him so well, but the truth was that he would have excelled in many other situations, such as brewing, reconnaissance, or enchanting.

Sadly, those talents wouldn't help him much in the next fight, but he would deal with things as they came.

A few minutes later, the group reached the teleportation zone. The demigod scanned the area momentarily, seemingly trying to recall the exact spot where the enchantments had been drawn.

The tournament's organizers hadn't employed those flying devices of theirs to stream the event this time, probably because it had taken place on a populated planet with its own technology and rules that they had to respect. However, they must have still used something else to show the competition to the spectators: probably an enchantment located near the flowerbed.

Eventually, the Clear mage guided the mortals to a certain spot, a series of colourful runes flashing beneath their feet: and tail: before whisking them away.

Everyone besides Kassorith, that was.

Percy's heart sank as he and his spectral companions suddenly found themselves stranded on an alien planet with a barely-familiar demigod, clearly singled out from the rest of the group.

"Relax," the powerful Inimit said, speaking a lot more casually than before. He didn't even bother to infuse his willpower into his voice this time. "The others haven't left the planet either. We've just separated you because there is somebody who wants to talk to you for a few minutes. You have my word that you will all be sent back to Maradion afterwards."

Kassorith's features twisted into a grimace. "That didn't sound like a request."

The demigod sighed. "I'm afraid it wasn't."

He then gestured to a spot a few dozen metres to his left, where the world itself split open to reveal an oval-shaped portal. It was barely tall enough for a person to fit through, a bright, jade-coloured background visible on the other side. Judging by how crude the construct was when compared to Metatron's Decree, it had to be either the handiwork of a mortal with a space affinity, or a god without it.

Percy clenched his host's fists, fully aware that his earlier demonstration had caught the wrong kind of attention.

Did he regret not trying to make his margin of victory even thinner?

A little, though he also understood that he'd done about as well as he could with his limited information. He had no idea what criteria the flowerbed used to evaluate spells, so any Crude spell he selected might have been deemed worse than Remlat's.

Alas, the consequences of his startling performance were here, and there was no avoiding them. Hopefully, whoever was standing at the other end of the portal only had a few basic questions for him: questions that he would be able to answer.

The thought of activating Metatron's Decree to escape to the Vault did admittedly cross Percy's mind, but he had come too far to give up so easily. He also happened to believe the demigod's words that the participants would all be allowed back to Marador Prime unharmed. The Clear mage had no reason to lie, and it wasn't like Kassorith had done anything that would warrant a harsher treatment.

'Nothing besides defecting to Metatron and helping an outsider infiltrate the alliance.' Percy swallowed hard, though he knew that the Void Hand's people would have acted much more forcefully if his host's true crimes had come to light.

With his mind made up and his spectral companions on the same page, Percy seized control of Kassorith's body and slithered into the mysterious portal, bracing himself for what came next.

Chapter 663: Calamity affinity (4)

Percy found himself inside a somewhat cozy study. The room was far smaller and simpler than what would befit the lofty existence who owned it, though it wasn't without its magical quirks.

Every solid surface in the office: from the walls, floor, and ceiling, to the desk, bookshelf, and every other piece of furniture: were made of a single material. Percy was tempted to describe it as wood, since there was no mistaking the patterned, grainy texture that was common in many places across the universe, yet this particular variant of wood was quite different from the norm.

It was smooth and glossy, resembling jade more than anything organic, complete with a soft green lustre that illuminated the study uniformly, so that it didn't require any other light source.

Percy would have been quite perplexed if he hadn't come in contact with something similar before. The thick, minty scent in the air, coupled with the warm embrace of life mana everywhere around him only confirmed his guess, giving him a pretty good idea of where the portal had sent him.

However, he had more pressing things to worry about than his location.

On the opposite side of the desk sat a female Inimit, her skin smoother than porcelain and her brown feathers so perfect that Percy wasn't sure they were even real. It felt equally likely that a famous artisan had moulded them out of the finest clay, assuming that one could even find a person that skilled or a material that flawless.

The woman was, without question, the youngest-looking adult Inimit he had encountered so far, which was exactly how Percy knew that she was actually the oldest of them all.

Having no idea what the proper etiquette was in this situation, he froze before the goddess, oscillating between introducing himself or bowing deeply. Eventually, he decided to simply remain silent until she addressed him. Kassorith and Micky didn't seem to disagree.

The deity regarded him for several long seconds, her kind but piercing eyes scrutinizing his host's body from head to tail-tip.

Percy wanted to swear, suddenly feeling quite grateful towards Metatron for having had the foresight to mask Kassorith's second core as thoroughly as he had. Percy had thought the titan overly paranoid at the time, though he was now hoping that the sludge the Thess'kalan had forced into his channels would be enough to hide the organ.

"Don't be so tense, child." The goddess spoke in a soft, almost motherly tone, her gaze easing just enough for Percy to let out the breath that he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. "I apologize for bringing you here as abruptly and forcefully as I have, but I lacked the time to extend a proper invitation. While you are my guest, I promise that no harm shall befall you. Even if you have some choice words for me or the manner in which I have abducted you, I won't judge," she added with a chuckle.

Percy could do nothing else but nod. A few choice words did admittedly cross his mind, but he didn't dare to utter them. The good news was that the goddess didn't seem to have seen through the façade, so the worst might not come to pass.

"Do you know who I am or why I brought you here?" the beaked woman asked, cutting to the chase after realizing that Percy wasn't going to talk unless prompted.

He shrugged. "I can tell that you are an Inimit deity. I imagine that my performance in the flowerbed has caught your attention, but I have no idea why it would."

The goddess bobbed her head, seemingly satisfied with his response. "My name is Ishkuria," she said, letting the words linger for a couple of seconds.

The revelation caused Percy's borrowed eyes to widen, the tension that had previously left Kassorith's body returning with a vengeance. Truth be told, whether she was a titaness at the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage or a newly-ascended goddess didn't really make much of a difference to Percy, as she would be able to squish him like a bug in both cases. However, he was worried that tinkering with Kassorith's mana inside her Decree had exposed his secrets.

Ishkuria rhythmically tapped her nails against the jade-coloured desk, her gaze adopting a slightly more admonishing quality. She didn't seem angry exactly, but she didn't look very pleased either. "Normally, this is the part where you introduce yourself. Do you plan to keep standing there like a mute?" She sighed. "Whatever… I believe your name was Kassorith?"

Her frustrated quip startled Percy, who hadn't even registered how rudely he had acted. Spending most of his days working in an underground cave, surrounded mainly by magical minerals and giant insects, clearly hadn't done much for his social skills. The few people he did interact with every now and then: even the gods and titans among them: didn't care about decorum.

"Forgive me, Your Divinity," he replied with an apologetic bow. "That is correct."

"Well, Kassorith… you are right that your earlier performance is what brought you here. Long story short, I have a request for you. It will require a significant sacrifice on your part, but you are allowed to decline. Still, I would like you to hear me out before answering."

Percy nodded at her to speak, genuinely curious to see what a titaness even more powerful than Phoebe or Metatron: probably the strongest entity that he had ever laid eyes upon, in fact: could possibly want from him.

“As the owner of a metal affinity and one who has wielded ice mana so skilfully through my Decree, I trust that you are quite familiar with affinity fusion. I wonder, however, whether you can tell me the difference between the fusion of two common elements, and that between two rare ones.”

Percy tilted his host’s head slightly. At first, he thought that it was some kind of trick question, though he realized that the titaness probably just wanted to gauge his current understanding.

“The fusion of two common elements is what we call a composite affinity. It can be produced by combining its components, but there are also mana cores that generate it directly. Meanwhile, the fusion between rare elements is inherently unstable and cannot be found in nature. A mage can still create it by fusing the right elements, but no such mana cores exist,” he explained, practically regurgitating the definition from the Moirai research material he and Gabe had read in the Vault years ago.

The titaness bobbed her head slightly, having clearly expected that answer. “What about the fusion between three or more common elements then? Is it any different?”

Percy thought back to his conversation with Phoebe before replying. “The fusion between three common elements is stable and can be found in nature, though three-elemental cores still do not exist: albeit for an entirely different reason. A mortal’s mana core is simply not durable enough to contain such mana types, so they are generally used by gods in the Elemental Acquisition stage.”

“Almost correct,” Ishkuria acknowledged. “This is the main reason why such combinations of mana hadn’t even been classified as proper ‘affinities’ until recently, though there is now a fairly new term to categorize three-elemental fusions, as well as a growing number of methods for mortals to use them.”

Percy’s soul was already in turmoil. Between Micky and Nephthys, he technically already had access to three common elements. He would still need to master lightning, acid, and maybe sound with his familiar’s help before considering anything more ambitious, but if there was a way to go even further, he definitely wanted to know it.

“Am I right to assume that the Void and Moirais’ Decrees are among those methods?” he asked.

“Sort of,” Ishkuria admitted. “They turn the impossible into barely possible, but they aren’t without their flaws. Splitting the common elements between multiple cores is an acceptable way for a mortal to accommodate enough of them to fuse into a calamity affinity, though it’s much harder than it sounds.”

“Why?” Percy protested. “I understand that the difficulty grows exponentially with the number of mana types involved, but I’d expect that, out of a pool of millions of talented and determined mages, a few would eventually succeed.”

“A reasonable assumption,” the titaness agreed. “The problem is that calamity affinities differ from composite affinities in more ways than mere complexity. Let me ask you this: if instead of a single metal core you had possessed separate earth and lightning cores, how would you have gone about fusing your mana types?”

Percy spent a few seconds to consider the options. “I would ask somebody to teach me directly. Or I would study someone who possesses a metal core. If I couldn’t find anybody like that, I guess that I’d just pick up a piece of metal and play around with my mana until I managed to produce something similar.”

“Spot on,” Ishkuria said, before shaking her head. “But what if the only mages capable of using it are gods whose methods aren’t applicable to you? What if you can’t find anybody with a mire or conflagration core to study? Picking up a steel dagger or a piece of ice is easy enough, but can you really hold drought or tempest in your hands?”

Percy’s eyes flashed with realization. Calamity affinities weren’t just complex. They were violent, difficult to wield: or even describe: and looking for a teacher to learn from or a suitable example to study was an exercise in futility. A god might be able to play around with a conflagration in their internal world: and that might even be exactly how those in the Element Acquisition stage went about mastering such concepts: but a mortal couldn’t.

At least not before reaching White or Clear, and even then, it wouldn’t be easy.

“You aren’t wrong, though. Given enough two-cored mortals with three or more common elements, a few of them are bound to figure it out,” Ishkuria said. “Unfortunately, the Moirai have beaten us in this race as well, becoming the second faction in the universe to produce mortal calamity users. My hope is that you will help me turn our alliance into the third.”

Chapter 664: Calamity affinity (5)

Percy already had too many questions. The titaness had mentioned that they didn’t have much time, so he didn’t hesitate to start voicing them.

“You said that the Moirai were only the second faction to succeed? Who was the first?”

“The people of Lai Tae,” Ishkuria said. “They chose a more direct approach. Why bother with all the hassle of learning to fuse elements from multiple cores: which they don’t even have a Decree for: when they could simply address the fundamental problem with calamity affinities right at its source?”

“I’m not sure I’m following,” Percy admitted.

“Their most famous free-type Decree strengthens their cores, allowing them to house a third common element. For the Lai Tae, using a calamity affinity is as simple as absorbing an extra affinity-changing treasure. The rest is done automatically inside their body: no understanding needed.”

Percy drew a sharp breath. Such a Decree might not be quite on par with the Moirais’ or Void Decrees, but it was definitely better than every other free-type Decree he had seen so far in the tournament. Didn’t that mean that every Lai Tae deity without a rare affinity would basically skip over half of the Elemental Acquisition stage?

Leaving aside how helpful this would be for mages in the Concept realm, those in the Colour realm would benefit even more. Wouldn’t a calamity affinity essentially make a mortal unbeatable before their ascension?

Needless to say, Percy already made a mental note to visit this Lai Tae place: or faction: one day.

“It’s not perfect. Their children still cannot awaken a calamity affinity randomly, though I believe that they do have a small chance of inheriting it from their parents. Also, those with rare affinities have

nothing to gain from this, and those with common elements have a lower ceiling as gods, so the Lai Tae merely produce a greater number of deities of mid-to-high strength rather than any truly exceptional figures. If we had to choose, our Decree is definitely better, though it's admittedly a personal goal of mine to try and replicate theirs as well."

"Wow. That's still quite a powerful Decree," Percy said. "How come the peak factions haven't bullied them into sharing it?"

"Believe me, everyone wants to, but it's not that simple. Lai Tae might not be quite at the level of the Moirai or our alliance, yet they are not far off. They are considered one of the top ten most powerful factions in the universe: probably stronger than the founding members of the Void Hand are individually. A peak faction could still destroy them, but the losses would outweigh the gains, which is why our alliance has adopted a softer approach, trying to recruit them into our ranks."

"I'm guessing they said no."

"Sadly," Ishkuria confirmed. "Another way to master calamity affinities would be to send our mortals to the corresponding Elemental Sources."

"Do such things even exist?" Percy asked, having never heard of them.

"Calamity affinities are stable, so there's no reason why there wouldn't be Elemental Sources for them. However, nobody has ever seen one, so the current hypothesis is that the higher-order Sources have all somehow ended up in the unexplored regions of the universe. We aren't sure how that happened, yet that's the only explanation that makes sense."

"That's probably a good thing," Percy said.

If the Elemental Source of a calamity affinity found itself on a populated planet, it would spell disaster for its inhabitants. Assuming that such Sources behaved like the rest, they would basically force their affinity into the mana core of every mortal unlucky enough to be born on that world. That would be deadly for any faction but the Lai Tae.

“Well… if we did control one such Source, we could just keep the planet empty and only sent our mages there to meditate, but I suppose there is no point in even discussing such arrangements before we locate the Sources,” the titaness explained.

“Okay. So subjugating, recruiting, or stealing from the Lai Tae is a work in progress, and the Elemental Sources are missing. That means that the only way to master calamity affinities at the moment is to throw mortals with two cores at the problem until one of them gets lucky,” Percy summarized.

“Pretty much. Unfortunately, the Moirai have a vast numerical advantage of two-cored mages over us, and it doesn’t help that nobody who receives the Void Decree would willingly select anything but a rare affinity for their new core.”

Percy couldn’t help but frown. “I’m guessing that this is the sacrifice you want me to make?”

Ishkuria nodded. “I know that it’s a lot to ask: I’m basically asking you to cripple your future potential as a god to aid me in my research. However, know that you will be helping our entire alliance tremendously if we succeed. I’ve been trying to convince the others to lend me a research subject or two for a long time, but nobody is willing to listen.”

“Hold on.” Percy raised his host’s hand to stop the titaness. “Leaving aside whether I’m interested in contributing to your project, I still don’t understand why you need my help. You’ve mastered all the combinations of common affinities already, haven’t you?”

“Correct. Every god at the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage has mastered not just all the common, composite, and calamity affinities, but even the four- and five-element fusions.” The titaness sighed. “However, there are certain nuances that I can only explore by studying a mortal wielding a calamity affinity.”

“How so?”

“Kassorith, do you know what the difference is between a mortal and a god who possess the same affinity?”

Percy considered the question for a moment. “Comprehension? A mage in the Colour realm doesn’t necessarily understand how the element works. They were just born with it, and the mana type is generated automatically inside their core. Meanwhile, a god has to actively understand and incorporate the associated concept into their internal world.”

“Precisely,” Ishkuria said. “The same is true of blessings, actually. The child of a deity may be lucky enough to inherit one of the concepts the parent has mastered, or they may absorb one into their core from a Ring of Sacrilege, but they still need to comprehend that concept during their ascension if they wish to keep it. On the other hand, deities who use the Rings have to actively comprehend the associated concepts to absorb them: not just circulate mana through the artifacts.”

Percy creased his scaled brow. He would have to put in some work if he wanted to retain his own blessing of permanence through his ascension, otherwise he would have to waste more time acquiring it again.

‘No, wait. That’s not even an option for me,’ he reminded himself.

If he lost the blessing even briefly, his four spectral traits would tear his soul apart. Immediately planting the concept of permanence into his internal world was arguably going to be even more important than retaining his elements. Failing to achieve the former would directly kill him, while failing at the latter would only turn him into a weaker deity.

Great… as if the Lone Wanderer’s apotheosis wasn’t going to be complicated enough already.

“What’s your end goal though?” he asked again. “Let’s say I agree to your request and pick a composite affinity for my new core. How do you know that I will succeed in mastering a calamity element if it’s so difficult? And even if I do, how exactly will that help you?”

“You will succeed for two main reasons: because anybody capable of casting a Refined spell inside my Decree with a composite element that they do not possess is, undoubtedly, the most promising candidate I could have ever hoped for. Furthermore, I’m also prepared to sacrifice a lot to help you.”

“And then what? You’ll have one mortal capable of casting a couple of calamity spells,” Percy pointed out.

“That’s more important than you think,” Ishkuria replied. “Studying you will hopefully allow me to upgrade my Decree, so that it simulates calamity affinities on top of common and composite ones. I doubt that my colleagues will be convinced to let our mortals create non-rare second cores: even with such a tool at our disposal: but at least our gods will have an easier time climbing through the Elemental Acquisition stage. Furthermore, my long-term project is to cast my own version of the Lai Tae’s Decree, which will have an even greater positive impact on the alliance.”

Percy fell silent upon hearing the titaness’ explanation. He now understood what she wanted from him and why, though that didn’t mean that he was ready to volunteer.

While he had no intention of selecting anything but a rare affinity for his new core, he technically didn’t need to make any sacrifices. Between the ice and acid mana he could borrow from Micky and Nephthys, he already met Ishkuria’s requirements. Hell, even Kassorith did: through his metal and lava cores.

The thought of receiving guidance from the Inimit deity was tempting, but could Percy agree to her request without exposing his secrets?

‘Depending on how the Void Decree works, we might be able to avoid activating it immediately, or we could use Metatron’s sludge to block it while clearing Kassorith’s second core and pretending it’s the new one,’ Micky suggested.

‘Not a chance,’ Kassorith protested. ‘Even if we can do that without getting caught, Ishkuria is going to wonder why I picked a lava affinity when I could have selected one that doesn’t partially overlap with my first core.’

‘Maybe we can claim that it happened by accident.’ The Huehuan mentally shrugged. ‘We still have no idea how the Decree actually works, so there might be a loophole we can blame.’

‘Forget it,’ Percy interjected while metaphorically shaking his head. ‘We’ll leave as soon as we get the Void Decree. Not up for debate.’

Every second they spent in the alliance’s territory was a risk. Staying longer than necessary would only increase the odds of them or Lanthaniel getting caught. They couldn’t afford to lose everything they had gained in the tournament just for this, and they wouldn’t be able to receive Ishkuria’s guidance anyway if they weren’t here.

Besides, helping the titaness meant helping the Void Hand grow even stronger. Percy would rather avoid that, which was the only reason he had made his life difficult by not taking advantage of his boosting art.

His companions didn't argue with him, clearly agreeing with his decision. He was about to turn Ishkuria down, when she spoke first. "Which calamity affinity would you pick?"

Percy frowned. "Lady Ishkuria, I'm truly honoured by your offer, but I–"

"Please humour me this. You don't have to agree to anything. Just… which combination of three elements would you choose to work on if you only had the chance to focus on one?"

Percy smiled helplessly, though he didn't want to offend the goddess. "Eh… What can I say? I like the ice affinity, so I guess I would have tried combining it with lightning."

He chose his words carefully, so as to smuggle his friends' affinities as something that Kassorith could realistically select. The fact that Percy had used ice during the event only made his interest in it more believable.

Percy could tell that his host wasn't happy with an element that he couldn't actually wield, but this was just a hypothetical anyway. Even if it wasn't, it was Percy and Micky who had won the competition and earned this meeting, so Kassorith wouldn't get a vote.

"Storm it is, then," the titaness said with a nod, the certainty in her voice giving Percy a bad feeling.

"Lady Ishkuria? Like I was just trying to tell you, I'm afraid that I'll have to decline. I just don't think I want to give up on a rare aff–"

The goddess wasn't even listening to him. A colourful vortex blossomed in her sternum, reminding Percy of when Lanthaniel had invited them into his internal world. He only caught a fleeting glimpse of Ishkuria's, though it was enough to tell that it was far larger and more complete.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the titaness jammed her fist into the portal, causing her whole body to spasm violently. Percy hadn't known that gods could enter their own internal worlds and, from the looks of it, they weren't supposed to.

"Lady Ishkuria! What are you doing?!"

Chapter 665: Calamity affinity (6)

The colourful portal swirling around Ishkuria's arm wobbled, her body shaking in unconcealed agony. The whole room appeared to tremble with her, a few books falling from the shelves as the goddess gripped her desk hard enough with her remaining hand to split the jade-coloured wood in half.

"Lady Ishkuria?! What the fuck is this?!" Percy cursed, those choice words finding their way out after all.

The titaness wasn't paying him any attention. She stubbornly clung to whatever it was she was holding, her beautiful face paling as her smooth forehead creased.

Violent gales of wind and thick bolts of lightning spilled out of the vortex, carving curved or zigzagging lines across the walls and ceiling of the study. Percy was sure that his host's body would turn into a pile of minced meat or get incinerated if the blasts of divine magic so much as touched him, though Ishkuria thankfully retained enough control over her mana to prevent that from happening.

Percy and his companions watched in horror as the glossy brown hair on the deity's scalp greyed and the feathers on her wings fell off one after the other. Permanent-looking wrinkles appeared on her skin as her body visibly aged: something that Percy hadn't known was even possible for a god to experience.

The energy gushing out of her internal world intensified, accompanied by bursts of booming thunder that nearly ruptured Kassorith's eardrums.

A few seconds later, Percy heard something rip.

It felt like somebody had torn a page out of a book, but magnified a thousandfold. The sound was still almost muted when compared to the cacophony of noise that had rattled the whole building up to that point, yet Percy could tell that whatever Ishkuria had just done was of great significance.

The titaness finally pulled her shaky hand out of the closing portal, holding something tightly in her grasp. Indigo tendrils of electricity and miniature cyclones tried to escape through the gaps between her fingers, but they could only flail for a few centimetres around her hand as something appeared to anchor them to the centre of her palm.

With a wave of her free hand, Ishkuria caused a small object to shoot out of the pile of books on the floor, landing on what remained of her desk. After rolling a couple of times atop the broken wood, a treasure chest came to a halt between Kassorith and the titaness, seemingly fashioned out of the same material as everything else inside the World Tree sapling.

Ishkuria's feathers: all of them: those that had already fallen off her back, the ones that had somehow survived her insanity, and even the new feathers that were currently growing on her wings: flew above the desk, landing softly in a pile tall enough to easily bury the chest.

The goddess did something, and the brown feathers lit up in various different colours, melting into a series of glowing lines that snaked their way onto the container. The substance hugged the treasure chest tightly, the lines interlocking to form intricate symbols of a runecrafting language that Percy didn't recognize, before fading into the object.

Ishkuria placed whatever it was that she had ripped out of her internal world into the enchanted chest, closing it with a swift motion. Finally, she completed the process by locking the box with a jade key that she had pulled out of seemingly nowhere.

Examining her handiwork for a few seconds, she didn't seem satisfied with her arrangements. She waited for her feathers to grow back a second time, applying yet another layer of enchantments to ensure that the treasure chest remained sealed.

Percy was too shocked to speak. He merely stared at the titaness in disbelief, soon realizing that her aged body wasn't going to fix itself anytime soon.

"Don't look at me like that," Ishkuria said, her voice tired and raspy. "The damage is not permanent. My body and the hole in my internal world should both recover in a few thousand years at the latest. A drop in the ocean for one as long-lived as me."

“A few thousand years…” Percy muttered, the weight of the deity’s words hitting him like a battering ram.

His grandfather: no. All of House Avalon – hadn’t even been around for that long. Percy obviously understood that Ishkuria was much older than that, but it still seemed like a long time to cripple herself for: and all of this on a whim.

“Why the hell would you do that?! I didn’t agree to your request! I wasn’t going to! I…”

Percy’s voice trailed off as he realized that it didn’t really matter. Ishkuria was clearly insane, but she wasn’t stupid. She must’ve known that he’d been about to decline. He’d managed to get enough of the words out before she did whatever she’d done, and his response had been obvious enough even before then.

She’d done this on purpose.

“Like I said…” The now-old lady sitting across from Kassorith smiled weakly, though her tired pupils burned with an intensity that didn’t match her new appearance at all. “I won’t force you to choose anything. However, I hope that you understand how much of a pity it would be to pick a rare affinity for your new core and let my sacrifice be in vain.”

She pushed the jade box closer to Kassorith.

Percy sighed. “What even is this?”

The titaness shrugged. “It’s a carefully selected piece of my internal world. It would have dissipated already if I hadn’t stabilized it with a prototype of my Decree. It works a bit like the flowerbed that you have used earlier, but it’s flawed in a number of ways.”

“Flawed how?”

“Once you open the box, everyone in its vicinity will be able to briefly experience the storm affinity. It won’t give you a choice, it will only work once, and I doubt that the illusion will last for more than a

minute or two. Even if you don't use it, the fragment will probably fade away in a few centuries: long before my internal world recovers."

"So, it's basically a small part of the functionality that you want to eventually install into the Decree?" Percy asked.

"More or less. It's the best version that I can currently produce. I don't know if you've noticed, but even the common elements simulated by my flowerbed are imperfect, and the problem is only compounded for composite affinities. Even after I upgrade my Decree, I don't expect it to simulate calamity mana types very well. The fragment inside the box is even worse than that. Do not attempt to model your storm element according to it, as it will only mislead you. The best way to use the box is to try to figure out the storm affinity on your own for a century or two, and only open the box to gain some insight in case you hit a wall."

"I still haven't agreed to your request," Percy reminded her. "You've just mutilated yourself for nothing."

Ishkuria chuckled. "It's called a gamble. From where I sit, the odds of getting my way are slightly higher now than if I hadn't done this. Besides, whether or not you had agreed, words are cheap. I'll only recoup my investment when you show me a storm spell. If you don't, so be it. Sitting on my ass all day, trying and failing to comprehend the life concepts oozing out of a broken Source is hardly a more productive use of my time."

"You're nuts. All of you gods are," Percy spat, but that only caused the ancient Inimit's grin to deepen.

"Before I send you back, I want you to have two more things," the titaness said, scanning the pile of scattered books in search of something else.

Eventually, she pulled out another box, not too dissimilar from the first. She opened this one without a key, showing Percy that it didn't contain anything dangerous or sensitive, and that it wasn't enchanted.

She went as far as to scratch its base with her fingernails to carve three deep grooves into the material, probably to ensure that Percy didn't accidentally mix the boxes and open the wrong one later.

“What are these?” he asked, examining what appeared to be a couple dozen tea bags, a bright, green powder glowing inside them.

“They’re exactly what they look like: concentrated extract of first-generation leaves. I would have treated you to some tea at the start of this meeting, but it has only just occurred to me that those from weaker factions can’t easily get their hands on the leaves. Am I right to assume that you were planning to claim some from the tournament?”

Percy nodded, his host’s mouth drying.

“They work just like the leaves themselves,” Ishkuria explained. “Boil a teabag in water for ten minutes, and make sure you drink all of it. Only the first portion will triple your lifespan, it’ll upgrade the effect of a second-generation leaf but not stack with it, and you can’t have multiple people sharing a single portion. The teabags will last for a few thousand years, so you don’t have to use them immediately.”

“Lady Ishkuria…” Percy gritted his borrowed gums. Speaking his next words felt like stabbing himself in the heart, but it had to be done. “I can’t accept this. For the umpteenth time, I haven’t agreed to your request, nor am I going to.”

“Then don’t,” the goddess said, pushing both chests even closer to Kassorith. “Either way, this is a gift. If you do decide to help me, we can’t have you dying of old age right before you succeed, and if you don’t, you can just treat this as compensation for being forced into this meeting. I would have pulled some strings to bypass the tournament’s rules and get you a bunch of free-type Decrees, but the alliance is a lot stricter about those. However, if you fulfil my request, I’ll do whatever is necessary to get you a form of our ancestral Decree.”

Percy’s borrowed eyes widened. “You can do that?”

“It won’t be easy,” Ishkuria admitted. “It was only cast once, affecting the bodies of a group of mortal Inimits who had been alive at the time. Afterwards, it was passed from parent to child until it spread to everyone else.”

“Doesn’t sound like you can give that to an outsider,” Percy pointed out.

“Not me. The titan who created it is a friend of mine, however, and he owes me a favour. I can get him to do it again, and we can probably modify it to affect your scales or any other body part you want.”

“I’ll consider it,” Percy said with a sigh.

Crazy or not, Ishkuria had already given him a lot of priceless things for free: an opportunity to greatly accelerate his mastery of the storm element, several rewards’ worth of first-generation leaves, and a chance to obtain another powerful Decree that he had no idea how else to get his hands on. At least, it didn’t sound like one that he could steal merely by possessing an Inimit.

However, Percy was going to be at odds with the Void Hand after Lanthaniel’s ruse was uncovered, so arranging another meeting with Ishkuria wouldn’t be easy: let alone bringing his main body to Tanarill to receive his prize.

For now, he could do nothing but nod and tentatively accept the terms she had forced on him.

“It’s all I ask,” the titaness said, sounding pleased.

Another portal opened right where Percy had entered the room from, a familiar-looking forest visible on the other side. Just before he slithered through it to reach the teleportation platform, Ishkuria tossed him the third and final object that she had promised him: a round piece of jade-coloured wood with two of her actual feathers sticking out of its edge. Both sides of the vibrant coin depicted the face of the titaness, seemingly carved into the material by her own nails.

“If you ever get in trouble with anyone in the alliance, show them this,” she said as the portal closed behind him.

Chapter 666: End of the group phase

Percy and his companions were reunited with the other contestants back at the stadium. They were told by a Maradorian demigod with aquamarine-coloured skin that the delay had been caused by a fault in the long-range teleportation enchantments. Apparently, the protocol in such situations was to redirect the teleportees to a temporary lounge that was located elsewhere on Tanarill until the issue was resolved.

Judging by the participants' expressions, nobody had bought that crap.

It didn't take an expert in runecrafting to know that such flaws were rare, so everyone could tell that the delay had had something to do with Kassorith's extraordinary performance in the flowerbed. The fact that he hadn't joined them in the lounge had only made the demigod's lies even more obvious.

However, the mortals hadn't been kept waiting for long, and the matter didn't really concern anyone but Percy's host, so nobody cared enough to raise a fuss.

The crowd's reception was also somewhat muted, probably due to the delay having doused the spectators' enthusiasm. Still, Kassorith got showered with plenty of love upon his return, since everyone liked cheering for the underdog and the Maradorian civilians weren't used to Thess'kalans doing as well as he had.

Percy didn't care about any of that, his mind preoccupied with more pressing things.

'It was a close one,' Micky pointed out as they rode a flying greatsword back to the inn.

'It was,' Percy agreed.

Fleeing to the Vault to avoid the meeting with Ishkuria would have been the safer option, but it would have meant giving up on two rewards that he and Kassorith had worked very hard to earn: not to mention any hope of claiming the Void Decree.

Thankfully, the titaness had treated them about as fairly as she could have: better, even: since Percy and his host had slithered out of her place with a bountiful harvest.

Upon reaching his room, Kassorith manifested a metallic cup and enchanted it with a simple heating rune. After filling it with water, he pulled the objects Ishkuria had given him out of his spatial pin and dropped a teabag from the second box into the cup.

After warming it up according to the deity's instructions, he drank it. A refreshing feeling spread through the Thess'kalan's body the moment the magical liquid entered his stomach, reminding everyone of the life-extending feeling of an advancement.

Even though a first-generation leaf was supposedly more potent than the second-generation variants Percy and Kassorith had consumed in the past, the feeling wasn't nearly as pronounced. After all, the jump in lifespan between the consumables was somewhat modest.

'What are we going to do about Ishkuria?' Kassorith asked as Percy stored the three objects in his own spatial seal.

Now that Percy had so many spare teabags, he had considered giving a few more to Kassorith, to deliver to his lowborn friends in the Vault. However, he'd ultimately decided that it would be safer to hand the objects in person the next time he visited the artificial world. The wait would cost them a significant chunk of their remaining lifespan, but at least Percy would be sure that the teabags ended up in the right hands: rather than whomever Metatron deemed worthy.

'Nothing,' Percy replied with a mental shrug. 'For now, we'll just enjoy her gifts. It's not that I don't feel bad for her, but she knew what she was getting into. Our circumstances are way too complicated to risk helping her. Once the Void Hand learns of Lanthaniel's defection, we will all become fugitives from the alliance. Maybe the token she's given us will come in handy one day, or perhaps I'll find a way to pay her back without compromising our safety, but that's none of your concern.'

It pained Percy to give up on a version of the Inimit's ancestral Decree that would be specifically tailored to his needs: on top of whatever else a good relationship with someone like Ishkuria could bring him: but he could worry about all of that after finding himself in a stronger negotiating position. Neither he, nor Remior were ready for such gambles.

Besides, fulfilling the deity's request wouldn't happen in a year or two, so there was no sense in worrying about it this soon.

Kassorith responded with a spectral nod, apparently agreeing with Percy's decision for a change.

'Leaving the storm affinity aside, getting those teabags is great for us,' Micky pointed out. 'They've freed up one of our limited rewards to spend on something else.'

‘Indeed. I’d still rather not get more than one active-type Decree from the tournament, nor try claiming two mental-types at once. However, we might be able to pick an extra free-type Decree if we win our next match,’ Percy replied. ‘Let’s check out our next opponent before deciding.’

Following his stellar performance in the second event, Kassorith had unexpectedly climbed to first place in the group and qualified for the elimination phase. Percy would have loved to receive an extra prize for that, but first and second place were sadly treated the same way.

Even more annoyingly, participants had to claim their rewards before the next fight, so waiting to see whether they would win or lose wasn’t an option. The good news was that Kassorith was allowed to delay his selection until after the lottery, meaning that they would at least have a better idea of their opponent’s strength before planning their choices out.

Two days later, Percy and Kassorith’s shared expression twisted into a grimace as they read the details on the terminal closest to their inn.

‘Lohkrat. A Maradorian with two Blue cores. Plasma and soul affinities, as well as a secondary ice affinity. On top of a short-range teleportation bloodline,’ Micky summarized.

This was just the official information on the man. The fact that they hadn’t watched any of his battles and thus weren’t aware of the specific spells he favoured or the way he fought only made things worse.

‘Well, crap… so he’s resistant to both heat and cold: which is basically all of our strongest attacks. If that wasn’t bad enough, his soul spells will slip through our defences more easily, and his bloodline will make it impossible to keep our distance,’ Kassorith concluded.

Percy nodded grimly, knowing full well how deadly a soul affinity could be. ‘I’m more worried about him hitting our wisp. In theory, the stadium’s enchantments should protect you from lethal damage, but we have no idea if they’ll do the same for us.’

The trio let out a joint sigh, everyone realizing that they were probably at the end of their rope.

‘Should we surrender? To avoid any accidents?’ Micky asked.

Percy thought about it for a few seconds. ‘No. This one is way too important to give up without even trying, though we need to be ready to concede the moment things get dangerous.’

He wanted to be optimistic. There was only one final battle separating them from the Void Decree: their main goal in this entire tournament: yet there was no denying that the odds were not in their favour. Objectively speaking, Lohkrat was an even worse matchup for them than Remlat or Zurvanai, and Kassorith hadn’t been able to do much against them either.

‘Alright. Given how badly we got screwed by the lottery, I suggest that we choose our rewards under the assumption that we aren’t getting anything else,’ Micky said.

This… really wasn’t ideal. Their prizes naturally included an upgrade to Percy’s Status. Doing that now came with the risk of crippling some of their most important abilities before the fight, which would only hurt their chances even further.

On the other hand, not picking the mental-type Decree early would probably mean missing out on it along with the Void Decree. Something that Percy would rather avoid, since this was arguably the second most important prize in the tournament.

‘Metatron won’t be happy if I go back empty-handed,’ Kassorith protested. ‘He’s given up on a spy for this.’

‘None of us are happy about it,’ Percy corrected him. ‘But there’s no use in crying over spilt tea. Earning three new Decrees and an extended lifespan is still well worth the hassle.’

What Percy left unsaid was that he and Micky had received even more rewards than their host: Ishkuria’s gifts, the marks that they had placed on some of the alliance’s most important planets, and the knowledge of where the Void Hand’s Rings of Sacrilege and one of their Elemental Sources were located.

Kassorith would never get another chance to participate in the tournament, but that wasn’t necessarily true for Percy. Of course, finding another suitable host wouldn’t be easy, so he would have much preferred to succeed the first time around.

‘We can still use Circulation,’ Kassorith insisted. ‘Are you sure that keeping it secret is worth missing out on an extra mana core?’

Percy metaphorically shook his head. ‘First of all, there was never a guaranteed that the Void Decree will work for us. Secondly, Circulation is currently Metatron’s secret as well. Handing it over to the alliance means that he’ll also lose an important advantage over them. Now, that, is certainly something that he won’t be happy about, and I’m not the one who lives in his cube.’

Kassorith clicked his tongue, but he had no retort.

‘Hey, cheer up guys!’ Micky said. ‘We’d all known from the start that this mission was a long shot, but it’s silly to be acting all depressed right when we are about to claim a couple of brand-new Decrees. Think of how many people in the universe would dream of being in our shoes. Well… if Kassorith wore any.’

‘You’re right… I’m just being an idiot,’ Percy admitted. Had anybody told him that he’d be in this position a year ago, he wouldn’t have believed them.

How many clones had he sent out over the course of his life, and how many of them had brought anything even nearly as useful back? No matter how he looked at it, this was obviously one of his most profitable trips ever.

Regardless of anyone’s feelings, they had to hurry up and choose their rewards. They only had four days until their next fight, and acquiring either or both Decrees might involve long rituals on distant planets, so the window to act was tight.

Chapter 667: Active-type Decrees

Percy and his companions scrolled through the list of active-type Decrees first. It was by far the longest one, but they had skimmed through it a few times over the past few months, so they already had an idea of what was available. Still, it was a big decision, and Percy wanted to make sure that he was happy with his choice.

‘Leferketh’s Decree: Acquired by whispering your name in the ear of one of the Decree’s current owners and having them reciprocate with their own name. Can be activated to manifest and shoot house-sized meteors with Seventh Circle power. The Decree holds up to twenty-three charges that refresh once per Kijinian day. Note 1: The Decree can be acquired and used by anyone, but a minimum of Fifth Circle defences are recommended to prevent accidental self-harm. Note 2: Unauthorized sharing of this Decree is severely penalized by the alliance. Note 3: This Decree is engraved on its user’s eardrums and can be removed with assistance from Leferketh, though wait times for Decree removal usually exceed five Maradorian years. Note 4: A Kijinian day is equal to about two Maradorian days.’

‘Mano-Keeth’s Decree: Acquired by circumnavigating any moon of Rokatash on foot, without assistance or the use of magic. Can be activated ten times per Rokatashi month to expel enough corrosive mist to melt seven Violet beasts. Note 1: Participants are advised to circumnavigate Kremol, as it is the smallest available moon and does not contain any large bodies of water. Note 2: The acquisition process can take upwards of thirty Maradorian days even for a Blue running at full speed and with minimal breaks, so participants are advised to only choose this Decree after the conclusion of the tournament. Note 3: Temporary resistance to the corrosive mist is provided during the activation of the Decree, but users are strongly advised to escape the range of the spell within six standard minutes if they do not possess alternative means of protection. Note 4: This Decree is stored in its user’s bones and can easily be removed by any titan, including Mano-Keeth. Wait times for Decree removal can exceed half a Maradorian year if the user does not have a personal connection to a titan. Note 5: A Rokatashi month lasts seventeen Maradorian days.’

‘Honotuur’s Decree: Acquired by surviving a lethal wound from a special sacrificial blade. Can be activated thrice per Kaeshin year to produce and launch a town-sized metallic javelin in any direction. The projectile is powerful enough to pierce up to Ninth Circle defences. This Decree can be discarded at will. Note 1: Decree acquisition is handled by expert healers in Maradion. Participants are required to get their hearts stabbed by the sacrificial blade and bleed out for at least two standard minutes, but the healers will ensure their survival. Note 2: This Decree is engraved on the injured body part, which is typically the participant’s heart. However, a participant may request a customized acquisition process, including via mental or spectral injuries. Availability and wait times vary depending on the requested method.’

‘Mojylee’s Decree: Acquired by counting every star visible from the peak of Mount Leenai, on the eve of the Jef’theni Festival. A unique song will take root in the user’s soul. Singing it to completion unleashes large scale devastation on par with a Tenth Circle spell. Note 1: The roundtrip to Mount Leenai is estimated to take half a Maradorian day, so participants are advised to ensure that they have enough time before their next match. Failure to return in time will result in a loss. Note 2: The Jef’theni Festival coincides with the conclusion of the semi-finals during this year’s tournament. Participants are allowed to claim this Decree and reserve their spot at any time prior to that. Note 3: There is no limit to the number of times the Decree can be activated, but the songs are extremely long and typically require about two Maradorian days of nonstop singing.’

These were just a few of the most notable options, though the list went on for several pages and included dozens of Decrees. Over two-thirds contained some sort of offensive spell. The power of these bundled attacks ranged from the Seventh to the Tenth Circle. Percy hadn't seen anything weaker than a White's spell, though even the strongest attacks did not seem to exceed the limits of the Colour realm.

'I suppose that packaging a god-level attack in a form that can be freely wielded and unleashed by a mortal is quite difficult,' he reasoned.

'Don't you think these are a little weak compared to Metatron's Decree?' Kassorith asked.

It was true. Percy was willing to bet that instantly opening a portal to the other side of the universe would take a lot more power than whatever a Tenth Circle mage could produce, and Metatron's Decree didn't even have a limited number of charges or a preparation time.

'Hmmm… Maybe the Vault itself does most of the heavy lifting. At the end of the day, it's an artificial world: a colossal piece of magiscript. For all we know, the Decree only sends a signal with a person's coordinates,' Percy speculated.

Well, it couldn't be entirely like that, since his Status would have probably said so. Perhaps, the Decree opened a small portal that the Vault then helped grow large enough for a person to pass through, or something along those lines. Percy was pretty sure that the two worked in tandem to accomplish that.

Either way, he had no choice but to discard many of these offensive Decrees out of hand simply because their method of acquisition or the body part they affected were inconvenient for him. However, he still studied everything carefully, wishing to expand his horizons.

Some options, such as Leferketh's Decree were extremely practical, as they could be fired several times and would recharge relatively often. Picking one of those would basically turn Percy into a Seventh Circle mage offensively, thus giving him the strength to bring down a White opponent like Machaon even before completing his artificial advancement.

There were even those like Honotuur's or Mojylee's Decree that exceeded the strength of a normal demigod. Choosing one of them would make Percy unmatched in the Colour realm: at least on Remior: though the most powerful among these Decrees came with severe limitations.

Many could only be used a few times per year, or had absurd activation requirements, such as singing for two days straight. They wouldn't be impossible to use, but they would require careful planning.

'Pretty tempting, aren't they?' Micky asked.

Percy let out a mental sigh. He'd be lying if he said they weren't. He'd wasted an unreasonable amount of time over the past decade or so, worrying about the situation with House Asclepius. He'd worked tirelessly to complete his artificial advancement so that he would be able to protect himself and his family should the disgraced patriarch choose to attack. Percy had even been forced to rush his preparations to enter the void tournament because of that problem.

Now, all of that could be solved with a single decision. Whether he selected a Decree that would unleash a barrage of Seventh Circle spells or one that would allow him to charge and launch a Ninth Circle attack, he would be able to squash Machaon like a bug.

'I really hate saying this, but let's not do that,' he told the others.

Machaon was currently a major threat, but he was insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Percy didn't want to waste such a valuable reward on him.

These spells might seem powerful right now, but their strength was fixed and wouldn't grow alongside Percy. Firing a barrage of Seventh Circle meteors would help him greatly while he was still a Yellow or Green, but would become useless once he reached White or Clear and could fire even more powerful attacks on his own.

'We shouldn't just think about our personal strength. Something like Leferketh's Decree could easily elevate an entire faction,' Micky pointed out.

Percy mentally nodded. That Decree could be spread extremely easily to the whole population of a planet. The Void Hand had laws against doing that, but Percy wouldn't need to care about those after returning home.

The benefits of giving everyone: from the lowest Red to the patriarch of a Great House: the power to unleash Seventh Circle spells couldn't be overstated. Activating the Decree would be suicidal for the weaker mages, but an army of thousands of such soldiers could still unleash devastation upon a rival faction. After all, enough demigods could threaten even a god, and White was only a single grade below Clear.

'Well… we'd outgrow that pretty soon too,' Percy replied after considering his friend's words for a couple of minutes.

Leaving aside the morality of creating an army of suicide soldiers, this was the type of advantage that would only tip the scales in a war between lesser springs. Greater springs probably had several ways to defend themselves from such attacks. Furthermore, they possessed more active-type Decrees for their mortals to choose from, so they had to pay more attention to what they filled their limited slots with.

Having made his mind up, Percy moved on to other active-type Decrees that he found more interesting.

'Sapatap's Decree: Acquired by getting tapped on the forehead with Sapatap's sceptre. Can be activated once every ten thousand breaths to restore one's body to perfect health. This Decree can be discarded at will. Note 1: This Decree does not restore a person's lifespan or reverse the effects of aging. Note 2: The effect scales with a mortal's grade, but its potency steeply declines once the user enters the Concept realm. Note 3: Users are strongly advised to practice shallow and frequent breathing so that they can activate the Decree more often. Note 4: This Decree takes root in one's flesh.'

'Borothei's Decree: Acquired by praying at all seventeen shrines of Borothei on Maradion Prime. Can be activated up to eight times per Maradorian day to teleport a short distance. Note 1: This Decree cannot be manually discarded without a titan's assistance, but will automatically remove itself if the user attempts to acquire a fourth active-type Decree that they do not have a slot for. Note 2: This Decree takes root in the user's mind.'

Percy definitely found these utility options more useful than the offensive ones, partly because they did things that he wouldn't be able to replicate with raw power, and partly because their effects would still be somewhat usable in the Concept realm.

Then again, Sapatap's Decree was unlikely to follow Percy back to Remior, and he already had healing somewhat covered through his spiritual blood and his ability to drink lots of healing potions a grade higher than his own. Perhaps, the Decree would be the superior option while he was still a mortal, but that would probably change once he forged his internal world.

Borothei's Decree, on the other hand…

'Would you look at that? It's actually from this planet. It even comes with a self-discard safety feature and is likely to follow us back home,' Percy mused.

The fact that it could only handle short-range teleportation and only for a handful of times per day supported his previous guesses about Metatron's Decree, but it would still be a powerful ability for anybody without a space affinity.

'I don't know. Didn't Metatron say that every god is capable of opening short-range portals? Ishkuria is admittedly a rather powerful titaness, yet she was able to easily snatch us from across Tanarill without a space affinity,' Micky pointed out.

'Right,' Percy conceded with a mental nod. This one would also make for a suboptimal long-term choice then.

Sighing, he resumed browsing through the list, eliminating one Decree after another with his companions' help. The trio paid close attention to every detail about their potential choices, from their effects and limitations, to their methods of acquisition or removal, weighing all of it for the final decision.

After several rounds of back and forth, Percy found something that he felt quite happy with. It wasn't the flashiest option, but it was a rather unique one, and would synergize extremely well with his bloodline.

Chapter 668: Kerfyl's Decree

'Kerfyl's Decree: Acquired by reading Kerfyl's tome from cover to cover. Can be activated to establish a spectral contract between two willing parties. Infringing upon its terms will result in the destruction of one's soul. This Decree can be discarded at will. Note 1: Kerfyl's tome is stored in Maradion and is ninety-seven pages long. A translation device is provided to help with the acquisition process. Wait times for Decree acquisition may still vary, depending on demand. Note 2: The penalty for breaking the contract may be weakened up to severe, non-lethal injuries after mutual agreement from both parties. Note 3: The contract may be amended or voided entirely upon mutual agreement from both parties.

Note 4: The terms of the contract are enforced by the combined strength of the contractees' souls, and will even work on mages in the Concept realm.'

There were many things to like about this Decree. It wouldn't be as immediately helpful to Percy as some of the other options, but he still expected to use it extensively during his travels due to the nature of his bloodline.

His clones often had to strike deals with strangers, and Percy currently had very few tools in his arsenal to ensure that his hosts didn't stab him in the back. Granted, he typically proposed fair terms that a sensible person wouldn't have many reasons to renege on, and Percy could also use his Parasitic Connection spell to force a misbehaving host into compliance, but his methods were flawed in more ways than he would have liked.

For one, Percy had no way to ensure that his hosts continued to abide by their agreements after he left their bodies. Whether or not they would keep his existence secret from their factions currently depended solely on their goodwill.

With Kerfyl's Decree, he would never have to worry about any of that. He would be able to negotiate and setup a binding deal with his hosts before he even healed them. It was also one of the few active-type Decrees on the list that would be just as effective after he reached the Concept realm. The fact that it could be discarded without help from a titan was another welcome bonus.

If there was one thing that Percy didn't like about it, it was that it could be acquired in Maradion. While it would save him the hassle of travelling to a distant planet, it would also rob him of the opportunity to mark another of the Void Hand's worlds. Alas, one couldn't have everything, and Percy felt that the positives of this Decree greatly outweighed its negatives.

'I like it,' Micky agreed. 'It feels a little weak compared to the ability to charge up a Tenth Circle spell or create an army of Seventh Circle soldiers, but it's the sort of thing that we won't be able to easily replicate by simply growing stronger.'

Not everyone in the small group was happy with this decision, however.

'Are you kidding me? I can see why you'd want it, but this thing will be entirely useless for me in the Vault,' Kassorith protested.

‘Did you have something better in mind?’ Percy asked with a mental shrug.

The Thess’kalan appeared to consider it for a few seconds. ‘How about we forget about active- and mental-type Decrees for now and pick two more free-types? If they help us win the next fight, it’ll not only put the Void Decree back on the table, but we’ll earn even more rewards to spend on whatever you want.’

Percy couldn’t help but scoff. ‘That’s quite convenient for you, isn’t it? The most useful combat Decrees are Jolthoria’s or Efenat’s: which you’ll get to keep even if we lose the fight. But if that happens, me and Micky will get squat.’

Kassorith mentally shook his head. ‘It doesn’t have to be like that. One of the options can be Emah-Nuub’s Decree: which the two of you will probably get to keep: and a couple of mindsets can help a lot in the fight. If you’re willing to reconsider using Circulation, we’ll win the battle for sure, and we’ll all earn way more than we lost. Metatron won’t have any complaints about that.’

Percy fell silent for a while. His host had raised a couple of good points. With his boosting art and two more Decrees, they would have a very good chance of beating not just the two-cored Maradorian, but even the remaining opponents. That would earn them four more prizes, allowing them to pick everything they wanted and more.

However, that would come at the cost of strengthening both the Void Hand and the Vault of Magic way more than he had intended. What if they still lost despite revealing all their cards? Even if they won, the Void Decree might end up not working properly on him.

Percy wasn’t one to shy away from a gamble, but that also depended on whether he was willing to pay the price, and whether the gains justified the costs. Sometimes, it was wiser to cut one’s losses and live to fight another day.

Besides, with Kerfyl’s Decree at his disposal, he would have a much easier time finding another host to participate in the void tournament with. His main issue at the moment was that possessing any of the alliance’s mortals would expose the Moirais’ Decree, yet that was nothing that a well-drafted soul contract couldn’t fix.

‘I think we’re sticking with this,’ he reiterated, moving to claim the prize from the terminal.

Kassorith wasn’t having it. Trying to wrench control of his body from Percy, he caused his hand to freeze in the air right as his finger was about to tap the button.

‘Not happening! I’m not wasting my prize on something useless!’ the Thess’kalan insisted.

‘Your prize?’ Percy snapped back, feeling the urge to laugh. ‘Let me remind you that our collaboration was never meant to be a democratic one. We’ve already tried that on Thess’kala, and you ruined it by stabbing me in the back. Twice, even. Insuring myself against assholes like you is precisely why I want Kerfyl’s Decree.’

There hadn’t been much friction between him and Kassorith up until this point, largely because they had always managed to find common ground during their stay on Marador Prime. However, Percy didn’t consider himself obligated to tend to Kassorith’s wishes.

The opportunistic bastard had yet to even face any negative consequences for the stunt he’d tried to pull the last time around. As far as Percy was concerned, Kassorith should be thanking his lucky stars that he got to enter yet another tournament that he wasn’t qualified for, earning one mouth-watering reward after another.

Stirring up the fiends slumbering inside his soul, Percy fashioned his wisp into a series of claws, using them to tighten his grip on his host’s body. Forcefully possessing Kassorith had been harder on the scaled man’s home world, but Percy had grown much more skilled with his Spectral Art after accumulating another decade of experience. The fact that he currently had access to a far stronger domain certainly didn’t hurt.

Seizing control of the Thess’kalan’s hand, he finalized his selection, putting the debate to rest. He could tell that Kassorith wasn’t happy about that in the slightest, but there was nothing he could do.

The scaled man knew that falling out with Percy wouldn’t end well for him. Sure, Percy would also have to worry about souring his relationship with Metatron, but he had several ways to appease the titan. He could try convincing the pentapus that Kassorith had turned against him first, or he could simply compensate him with something more valuable than a two-cored Blue.

Meanwhile, Kassorith would die here and now.

The Thess'kalan's face was still locked into a grimace half an hour later, when Nawko arrived to escort him to his prize. The female Maradorian naturally asked him about it, forcing Kassorith to pretend that he was just unhappy about his next opponent.

Oblivious to the real reason behind the participant's sour mood, Nawko shared a few words of encouragement before leading him to a building full of short-range teleportation platforms.

Percy soon found himself in a different building. Thanks to the watery abyss that remained visible through the transparent floor, he knew that he was still in Maradion. However, the new building was covered in potent enchantments that were clearly designed to prevent mortals from leaving.

'I guess this is a part of the city where they don't want the tournament's participants to roam freely,' Micky said.

'Probably,' Percy agreed.

Nawko led them up through several flights of stairs, bringing them to the top-most floor of a ten-story library.

"Tap your badge against the gate to enter. I don't know how fast of a reader you are, but going through the tome should still take you a few hours, so I'll check up on you tonight," the female attendant said. "Will you be claiming another Decree before your next fight?"

"I will," Percy replied using his host's voice. "I haven't decided which one yet, but it's going to be one of the mental-type Decrees."

Nawko nodded. "Then, make sure not to waste too much time reading the book. If I'm not mistaken, all of the available mental-type Decrees have to be acquired on other planets, and you don't have that many days before the match."

With that, the Maradorian left Kassorith alone.

Percy followed the attendant's instructions, entering a small, cozy room. It contained nothing but a simple: yet well-maintained: wooden desk, a chair that Kassorith would have trouble sitting on due to his physiology, a single book that Percy assumed was the promised tome, and an enchanted piece of metal that reminded him slightly of the Vault's translation devices.

Slithering up to the table, Percy picked both objects up. Sticking the machine to the side of his host's head, he opened the book to the first page and commenced the arduous process of reading through what appeared to be the titan's autobiography.

Through his connection to Kassorith, he noticed that the Thess'kalan had temporarily placed the previous unpleasantness behind him, and was also focusing intently on the text. Kerfyl's Decree wasn't one that the scaled man had wanted, but there was no reason for him not to acquire it now that things had reached this point.

Since neither of them knew whether they would both have to read the book for that to happen, Kassorith clearly didn't intend to leave it up to chance.

Chapter 669: Mental-type Decrees (1)

'…thus bringing about the Industrial Age of the Rhodomian Empire.'

Percy closed the tome, checking the back cover for any additional text that he might need to read. The Decree's description had vaguely said "cover to cover", though it hadn't made clear whether that included the covers themselves. Either way, reading a handful of extra lines would only take a moment or two.

Before Percy was even done going through the book's summary, a warm feeling blossomed within his wisp. In mere fractions of a second, it permeated the rest of his severed soul, accompanied by the much-awaited notification.

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

Percy wasn't sure whether his host had obtained it as well, though the lack of complaints suggested that he had. Ignoring the Thess'kalan for now, Percy pulled up his Status, focusing on the new entry.

___

[Kerfyl's Decree]: Establish a spectral contract between two willing parties. Infringing upon its terms will result in the destruction of one's soul. This Decree can be discarded at will.___

Much like Metatron's Decree, Percy felt something tugging at the edge of his consciousness, waiting to be activated. In fact, there were two somethings this time, like a pair of strings twisted together into a braid.

Percy instinctively knew which end was responsible for contract creation and which was only there for getting rid of the Decree, so he wouldn't have to worry about mixing them up and discarding his prize by accident.

'We'll probably never need to use that feature,' Micky said.

'Yeah,' Percy agreed.

They had chosen this Decree precisely because they expected it to remain relevant well into the later stages of the Concept realm. Furthermore, they still had another empty slot to fill up, and even a peak faction like the Void Hand didn't seem to have too many enticing options. Finding two more active-type Decrees that they would rather keep was going to be a challenge.

Even if they did find a couple of decent alternatives, Percy felt that he was more likely to search for a way to get Metatron's Decree removed before Kerfyl's.

'I wonder how open he will be to giving me an alternative way of accessing the Vault. Maybe I'll ask the next time we meet.'

The odds of the pentapus agreeing were slim, as giving Percy the means to bypass his Decree was tantamount to introducing another vulnerability to the artificial world.

The good news was that Percy wasn't in a rush to get the Decree replaced, since it currently doubled as one of his most reliable tools for escaping from dangerous situations. However, it would hopefully be centuries before he spoke to the titan again, and a lot could change in that time.

Filing this away as a problem for future Percy, he read the description of the new Decree once more, noticing a detail that he hadn't considered earlier.

'Micky, do you think we can use it to form a soul contract between other people?'

'Possibly. It says "two willing parties", but it doesn't say that we have to be one of them,' the Huehuan replied.

Percy mentally nodded. It was something to test after returning home, though he had no plans of going around Maradion and creating deadly contracts between pairs of strangers.

'Kassorith? Are you done with this place too?' he asked his host.

Percy didn't regret picking Kerfyl's Decree against the Thess'kalan's wishes, but he wasn't cruel enough to deny his host the chance to earn it, in case he needed more time. Of course, it would be best if that didn't happen, since they only had a few days left to select and acquire another reward.

Fortunately, the scaled man grunted in affirmation.

Exiting the small room, they found Nawko waiting for them outside. She escorted them back to their inn before temporarily bidding them farewell. It was already late at night, but Percy and his companions luckily didn't need to sleep. They decided to spend the next few hours browsing carefully through their options and let the attendant know their decision first thing in the morning.

With a plan in place, they returned to the terminal and resumed their search.

'Okay. The list of mental-type Decrees is much shorter, though there are more things to consider,' Percy said.

In addition to the merits of the Decree itself: what it did, and how it would be acquired: they also had to think about how likely choosing it would be to expose their secrets, and how it might interact with the other elements of Percy's Status.

Beginning from the top, the trio carefully studied their options one by one.

'Hakkae's Decree: Acquired by bathing in Hakkae's pool for a full Tauren day. This Decree offers detailed analysis of one's combat capabilities, using the Void Hand's standard classification system to evaluate the user's offense, durability, agility, mana, and domain proficiencies. This Decree is bundled with Hakkae's Supremacy, which allows its user to leverage their greatest strength to shore up their greatest weakness. Note 1: Hakkae's pool has been transported to Maradion, so no long-range teleportation is required. Note 2: This Decree can detect and list a user's bloodline, blessings, mutations, mindsets, spells and Decrees, but not their spectral traits. Note 3: Hakkae's Supremacy works best if there is a larger discrepancy between the user's abilities, and is least effective at strengthening the user's domain. Note 4: A Tauren day is approximately equal to one Maradorian day.'

'Tauren? Aren't they Lanthaniel's people?' Percy asked, getting a mental nod back from Kassorith.

From what he could tell, Hakkae's Decree was basically a passive and automatic version of the first round of the void tournament. It would categorize a person's abilities under the alliance's paradigm which, in Kassorith's case, meant somewhere between the Fifth and Seventh Circles.

Other than a detailed assessment of one's combat capabilities, it would list pretty much everything that the current version of Percy's Status already did: except for his spectral traits, alchemic principles, and the type of his domain. The description hadn't even mentioned the last two sections, which probably suggested that none of the alliance's mental-type Decrees tracked them.

Percy wasn't too interested in the presentation side of the Decree, since Phoebe's Decree already took care of everything, though he couldn't help but wonder what the additional classification options would mean for him.

Having an "official" evaluation of his abilities would be as handy as it would be fun, though he wasn't going to pick Hakkae's Decree just for that. Then again, the effects might not be entirely superficial.

'Do you think it's going to synergize well with the Sage's Pond?' Micky asked.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised,’ Percy replied. ‘If it lets us learn more information about our opponents, it might improve the accuracy of our predictions.’

Leaving aside the information-related side of the Decree, Percy was most interested in Hakkae’s Supremacy: a boon on par with Ea’s Gift that had granted him his mutated eyes, and Obatala’s Approval which locked his domain in its strongest state.

According to the terminal, Hakkae’s Supremacy would balance out the user’s capabilities: to an extent. Percy wasn’t sure how it worked, though he could speculate based on the Decree’s other features.

‘I suppose that if somebody’s “greatest strength” is a Seventh Circle domain, and their “greatest weakness” is a Fifth Circle durability, it’ll somehow help them use their willpower to better protect their body.’

The way it would accomplish some conversions was more obvious than others. The mana category, for example, jointly assessed one’s mana capacity, regeneration, and control. The details were a bit complicated, but it would be fair to say that a higher mana evaluation roughly translated to having access to “more mana”.

Hakkae’s Supremacy would presumably help the user pour the excess mana into their spells in greater volumes and with higher efficiency, so as to improve their offensive capabilities or whatever else they were lacking.

As for doing the opposite?

Well, perhaps it would simply help a user reduce their mana consumption without significantly affecting the potency of their attacks, thus expanding their effective mana pool.

‘It’s an interesting Decree, but it wouldn’t be my first choice,’ Percy said after thinking about it for a while.

He wasn't going to look down on anything that could directly boost his combat power, but he understood that Hakkae's Supremacy would work better for a mage with relatively unbalanced capabilities.

Percy felt that his main body was about equally skilled in most areas. His arsenal was versatile enough that he had many ways of leveraging his strengths to cover his weaknesses even without external assistance, and he didn't see that changing anytime soon. In other words, this Decree wouldn't help him as much as somebody like Kassorith.

Hearing no protests from his companions: for now, at least: he moved on to the next choice.

'Amah-Lanett's Decree: Acquired by witnessing the hatching of an enari bird in Karaf-Thanat, the capital city of Remen-Alib. This Decree accurately tracks its user's remaining lifespan. This Decree is bundled with Amah-Lanett's Hand, which grants its user an instinctive understanding of what habits and lifestyle choices will maximize their remaining lifespan. Note 1: The roundtrip to Karaf-Thanat is estimated to take half a Maradorian day, so participants are advised to ensure that they have enough time before their next match. Failure to return in time will result in a loss. Note 2: Enari eggs are extremely common in Karaf-Thanat. If finding an egg about to hatch proves difficult, contact the local authorities. They are responsible for maintaining the conditions for Decree acquisition. Note 3: This Decree can detect and list a user's bloodline, blessings and spells, but not their mutations, mindsets, spectral traits or Decrees. Note 4: Amah-Lanett's Hand is limited to mundane things such as eating healthier food, exercising and getting enough sleep. Following its guidance is a lifelong process that will not extend a mage's lifespan by more than ten percent.'

Percy's borrowed eyes widened, mostly because he hadn't expected to find such a Decree, though he understood that its effects were somewhat modest. It only tracked a small subset of the things his Status did, and even its additional features weren't exactly groundbreaking.

As convenient as it would be to accurately estimate one's remaining lifespan, Percy could already approximate his fairly well if he took the timing of his promotions, the acquisition of his pure core, and the consumption of the second-generation leaf into account.

He wouldn't mind having a way to estimate Micky and Nephthys' lifespans, though both of his friends should have more time left than him, so it didn't really matter. Extending his lifespan, on the other hand, was something that he would have desperately wanted a few years ago.

A ten percent increase was admittedly quite small, probably because a mage's body was already highly resistant to disease or other external factors. Even this minuscule increase clearly required a lot of work to achieve, so Percy wasn't going to waste his reward on it: especially because he couldn't see any potential synergies between this and the other features of his Status.

'If there's one thing that makes me want to pick it, it's the location,' he told the others.

Amah-Lanett's Decree could apparently be obtained in not only the same faction, but even the same city as Emah-Nuub's: the free-type Decree that would allow him to give himself whatever mindsets he wanted.

If he played his cards right, Percy could potentially claim two valuable prizes with a single move, though it wouldn't be easy. He would be escorted to the city by Nawko again, and she was unlikely to let him wander off to give money to a bunch of homeless children. Based on everything he had seen so far, the Void Hand didn't take kindly to the contestants obtaining Decrees that they hadn't earned.

'Well, we can always just mark the place and send another clone later,' Micky suggested.

Percy was genuinely tempted to go for it. However, Amah-Lanett's Decree would only become relevant if his artificial advancement failed or he still ran out of lifespan in the Clear grade, despite all of the extensions he had already obtained. Neither of those things were urgent, as he still had several millennia left.

Meanwhile, Emah-Nuub's Decree was something he would have loved to have before his next battle, since he and his host could both benefit from a mindset or two. Sadly, the Thess'kalan was unlikely to acquire it in the next couple days, and Percy wouldn't need the Decree as much after that. He was already planning to eventually find a trustworthy mind affinity user to set up whatever mindset he needed.

Sighing, he moved on to the next option.

Chapter 670: Mental-type Decrees (2)

'Falazar's Decree: Acquired by leaving a bouquet of flowers at the tomb of Falazar's first wife, located atop Mount Wad, on planet Feteos. This Decree is bundled with Falazar's Quest, which produces missions meant to catalyse the user's growth. Note 1: The roundtrip to Feteos is estimated to take half a

Maradorian day, so participants are advised to ensure that they have enough time before their next match. Failure to return in time will result in a loss. Note 2: This Decree can detect and list a user's bloodline, blessings, mutations, spells, and Decrees, but not mindsets or spectral traits. Note 3: The missions produced by Falazar's Quest vary greatly from user to user, and are always innately beneficial. Falazar's Quest will magically amplify their rewards: usually by providing additional inspiration. Note 4: Unwanted missions may be abandoned, but discarding several in a row introduces progressively longer wait times as a penalty.'

'Wow… this one's genuinely good,' Percy said.

He didn't know what exactly these missions would look like. Would they be as generic as "practice your soul magic for a thousand hours"? Or would they be tailored to more specific aspects of the user's personality and circumstances: such as "infiltrate the void tournament again" or "steal a Ring of Sacrilege from Metatron"?

Percy wasn't exactly a fan of a Decree dictating his every action, but the description made clear that he was free to discard any mission he didn't like. At worst, he could treat Falazar's Quest as a source of ideas. At best, it would grant him additional rewards for tasks that he would have completed anyway.

'We still don't know how much this will accelerate our growth,' Micky cautioned. 'The benefits could easily end up worse than Hakkae's Supremacy.'

'Agreed,' Percy said. 'Let's put an asterisk on it for now. We'll revisit it if we don't find anything better.'

Ideally, he would love to come back and grab all of these mental-type Decrees one day, but he still wasn't sure whether there was a limit to the number of Decrees that his Status could devour. Until he confirmed that there was no opportunity cost to acquiring as many as possible, he intended to be cautious. Not to mention that his current situation only allowed him to select and bring back a single prize.

The next Decree was less exciting.

'Nisaba's Decree: Acquired by recalling one's earliest memory while prostrating before the statue of Nisaba on Oll. This Decree grants its user perfect recollection. This Decree is bundled with Nisaba's Whisper, which allows the user to project any memory of their choosing for others to watch and listen

to. Note 1: The roundtrip to Oll is estimated to take half a Maradorian day, so participants are advised to ensure that they have enough time before their next match. Failure to return in time will result in a loss. Note 2: This Decree can detect and list a user's bloodline, blessings, mutations, mindsets, spectral traits, spells, and Decrees.'

'Oll? I didn't realize that one of the founding factions was both willing and able to share their mental-type Decree with outsiders,' Percy said.

Then again, Nisaba's Decree was embarrassingly bad. While its ability to track its user's skillset was admittedly the most comprehensive of any single mental-type Decree he had encountered, its auxiliary features left much to be desired. Percy and Micky had already developed perfect recollection after their fusion, so they weren't interested in that.

The ability to share their memories with others wasn't entirely useless, as Percy wouldn't mind having a convenient way of showing his adventures to his friends and family. However, he could do something similar with his Soul-to-soul spell.

All things considered, this Decree was probably the worst one on the list. In hindsight, that was probably why the Ollorians were willing to offer it to their allies in the first place.

On the other hand, an opportunity to visit a founding faction would have been enough of a reason for Percy to consider it regardless, but this was a planet that he'd already marked.

'It's for the best,' Micky said. 'We wouldn't want a mental-type Decree from a founding faction anyway. They all have a strong presence in the tournament, and they might be able to spy on the rest of our Status if we grant them access.'

'You might want to reconsider that statement,' Kassorith interjected. 'The last option is also from a founding faction, but this one's actually good.'

'Ningirima's Decree: Acquired by catching seven hundred and thirty-three drifting leaves in the Amborian Forest on Zath'maan. This Decree is bundled with Ningirima's Mercy, which grants its user resistance to demonic infestations. Note 1: The roundtrip to Zath'maan is estimated to take half a Maradorian day, so participants are advised to ensure that they have enough time before their next

match. Failure to return in time will result in a loss. Note 2: This Decree can detect and list a user's bloodline, blessings, mutations, mindsets, spells, and Decrees, but not spectral traits.'

Percy frowned. 'Zath'maan? Which founding faction does that planet belong to?'

'Ah, right. I almost forgot that you're not too familiar with the alliance,' Kassorith said, before explaining. 'Zath'maan is the name of both the faction and their main planet. Remember how there was originally a fifth founding faction?'

'The one that got wiped out?' Percy asked.

Kassorith nodded through their connection. 'I didn't know that their planet was still around, to be honest.'

'That's not a problem then,' Percy replied with a mental shrug. 'Our issue with the founding factions is that they might be able to spy on us through the Decree, but it doesn't seem like we'll have to worry about that in this case. Even if there are survivors somewhere, they probably have more important things to worry about than the tournament.'

'That's actually a bit suspicious, don't you think?' Micky asked. 'If their world hasn't been destroyed, and the Void Hand still controls it, then how come there aren't any Zathmanians left in the alliance?'

'Zath'maani,' Kassorith corrected. 'But yes. That part isn't exactly a secret. The Zath'maani suffered heavy losses from an enemy faction, but it was the rest of our alliance that finished them off. Our leaders probably decided that there was no longer a reason to keep them around, and that it would be simpler to just get rid of them and seize control of their resources. I've told you before: there's no love between our factions. Just cold practicality.'

The Thess'kalan's words sent a chill through Percy's soul, reminding him once again that keeping his boosting art from the Void Hand was the right call, even if it meant giving up on his third mana core.

'Ishkuria didn't seem so bad,' Micky said.

‘Most people aren’t. Not on an individual level,’ Kassorith admitted. ‘But our leaders do whatever they deem necessary for the benefit of their factions. Of course, it’s also possible that we only saw Ishkuria’s nice side because she wanted something from us, and because she didn’t want to piss the entire alliance off by messing with a contestant more aggressively than she already did.’

‘Whatever the case may be, this truly sounds like a very useful Decree,’ Percy pointed out, steering the conversation back to the matter at hand.

Just like with the other options, he had no way of knowing how effective Ningirima’s Mercy would be at resisting corruption, but this was a rather unique and desirable effect regardless. Now that he had Metatron’s purification runes at his disposal, Percy wasn’t entirely powerless against infestations, but the first special event had made the inadequacy of his enchantments painfully clear.

If he wanted to fight back against not just regular infestations, but even the Cardinal Devils, he would need all the help that he could get: and this Decree certainly qualified.

Were there other ways to accomplish something similar?

Sure. Percy was planning to grab a suitable blessing as soon as he found the right Ring of Sacrilege, and he hadn’t given up on fine-tuning his enchantments. However, Marnok’s time was swiftly running out: if the poor sailor hadn’t been infected already. Percy would have to do anything and everything in his power to prepare if he wished to return to Robari within the next millennium.

‘If we’re lucky, it might give us more than just the resistance,’ Micky speculated.

Percy echoed his friend’s optimism. There was a non-zero chance of Ningirima’s Mercy interacting favourably with the Sage’s Pond or Obatala’s Approval, granting him and Micky a way of detecting corruption or even suppressing it with their domain.

Percy turned his attention to his host. ‘Are you planning to fight us over this one too?’

Kassorith surprised him by metaphorically shaking his head. ‘We don’t have to worry about demonic infestations in the Vault, so Hakkae’s Decree or Falazar’s Decree might have been better for me. However, the benefits they grant can be obtained in other ways, while resistance to corruption is much

harder to come by. I don't intend to remain a mortal forever, and demonic infestations are everyone's problem.'

'It's settled then,' Percy replied, a surge of anticipation rising in his wisp.

Having reached a consensus for a change, the trio finalized their choice through the terminal.