Wanderer 671

Chapter 671: Collecting leaves

The so-called Amborian forest was different from any other that Percy had been to. The trees were densely planted, and their branches were tightly interlocked, making this place resemble a jungle more than a forest.

Most annoyingly, almost every single tree that Percy had seen so far had been bare, which was a problem because he and Kassorith would need to catch several hundred “drifting leaves” to acquire Ningirima’s Decree.

“Is it winter or something?” the Thess’kalan asked, clearly sharing Percy’s concerns.

“It’s not,” Nawko replied. “If you look closely at the trunks and branches, you’ll notice that the bark has a rather unusual deep green colour. That’s because most of the flora here absorbs sunlight without leaves.”

Kassorith’s expression twisted into a grimace, and Percy wasn’t feeling any better than his host. The attendant must have caught that, because she added, “don’t worry. Some species do have leaves. We should find them farther in, though we should probably hurry up if we want to gather over seven hundred before your next match.”

The female Maradorian hastened her steps slightly, even though she was already nearly out of breath. The poor woman was clearly doing her best to pace herself so that she would last for the whole trip, yet without holding Kassorith back as much.

“Should I go on ahead?” Percy offered through his host’s mouth. “I can cover a lot of ground by myself.”

“I’m sorry.” The attendant shook her head. “I don’t doubt that you can, but we’re not allowed to let participants out of our sight on foreign planets.”

Sighing, Percy strained himself to push his domain as far away from his host’s body as possible, stretching his willpower thin to expand the range of his Sage’s Pond. His vision grew less detailed close to the edge, but that wasn’t a huge problem.

He would have loved to use a drop of spiritual blood or two to add a scout into the mix, yet he couldn't afford to injure his wisp more than he already had, and Kassorith's blood wasn't nearly as effective.

Thankfully, his senses finally picked up the first tree with leaves a few minutes later, with more such plants following not long after that.

There were actually two different species: the first were almost like regular trees, though they had thick and straight trunks that jutted upwards like giant spears. They didn't have nearly as many branches as other trees in the area, but they were a little taller. At their crowns, they had countless tiny leaves strung together into something akin to capes that fluttered in the wind and covered the neighbouring plants.

'Their strategy must be to outgrow everything else and snatch all the sunlight,' Percy guessed.

The second type of leafed-plant were parasitic vines that coiled around other trees aggressively, essentially using their competition as support to climb higher. The vines' leaves were as large as a man's palms, and round: almost completely circular.

Both species were quite scarce, though Percy estimated thousands of leaves across even the handful of specimens that he had spotted so far. The Decree's description hadn't specified the type of drifting leaves that he needed to collect, so he assumed that any would do.

"Am I allowed to shave off a tree?" he tentatively asked.

He didn't like the idea of damaging the forest, but a single tree was all it would take to scatter enough leaves for him and Kassorith to then collect. He didn't even have to remove all the leaves: just trimming the edge of the green cape slightly should suffice. It would probably regrow in a couple of weeks.

Nawko halted her steps, tiredly resting her palms atop both knees. "We… are not allowed to mess with… the environment at our destinations," she said amidst pants. "But… it's a small ask… Maybe I could make a small exception: since you're in a hurry and I'm part of the reason this is taking so long… Also, Zath'maan is currently uninhabited, so nobody would know…"

Just as an excited gleam was about to form in Percy's borrowed eyes, the attendant seemed to recall something.

"Ah… there's another problem. During my briefing, I was told that the Decree only counts leaves that fell off naturally," she said, shooting Percy's hopes down.

"Can I at least carry you?" he asked, manifesting a metallic platform wide enough for a person to comfortably sit on. He even added guardrails to hopefully prevent Nawko from falling.

The attendant accepted the suggestion without protest, appearing almost eager to sit atop the smooth disk. Kassorith forged a flying greatsword for himself too, before lifting Nawko up, since Percy had to use his domain to scan their surroundings.

Flying over the forest with the Maradorian in tow, Percy and his host soon found their first drifting leaf. Nawko explained that the Decree would only count it once, so they couldn't just keep picking up and dropping the same leaf seven hundred times.

Modifying the attendant's platform slightly, the Thess'kalan added a small metallic box for them to store the leaves in. Nobody knew whether pulling them into his spatial pin or letting them get eaten by an animal would affect the tally, and they didn't want to see their efforts wasted.

'I hope we both get the Decree after the first time,' Kassorith said through their connection.

Micky mentally shrugged. 'If the worst comes to pass, we'll just tell Nawko that something went wrong with the acquisition and we have to try again. I'm sure that she won't suspect anything.'

'That's not the problem,' Kassorith said, before elaborating. 'This is taking way too long. Completing even the first attempt before our match is going to be difficult. When the description said that the roundtrip is supposed to last half a Maradorian day, I guess it was only talking about the travelling time.'

Due to the scarcity of the plants and the relative lack of wind, Percy and Kassorith averaged a leaf every seven minutes, or less than ten per hour. To add insult to injury, Maradorian days were slightly shorter than those on Remior, which meant that they would be cutting it extremely close.

‘Well… we don’t expect to win the fight anyway,’ Percy said. ‘I don’t want to lose without even competing, but I’d rather do that than give up on a sure prize.’

His companions weren’t happy with that and, to be fair, neither was he, but they didn’t disagree with his decision either.

If there was a silver lining, it was that Percy had plenty of time to reach out to his main body and get the planet marked. He wasn’t sure how many precious resources the alliance had left on the deserted world, but this place used to be the primary planet of a founding faction, so he wouldn’t mind revisiting it. The fact that there weren’t any indigenous people here would only make it easier to possess a random beast and go around searching the ruins for forgotten treasures.

Days on Zath’maan appeared to be even shorter than on Marador Prime, since the local star set and rose three times before the trip was even over. About two Maradorian days in, Nawko pulled a crimson pill out of her pocket, swallowing it.

Having expected the journey to last several days, she had apparently requested a few insomnia pills from her superiors before meeting up with Kassorith, so that she wouldn’t delay him more than necessary. The medicine wasn’t as good as Percy’s spectral trait, and consuming the pills repeatedly would only lower their efficacy, but the woman should still be fine for a few days.

Percy appreciated the sentiment, though it was starting to look increasingly unlikely that the Maradorian’s sacrifice would make a difference. Mere hours before the match was scheduled to begin, Percy and his host collected their sixth hundredth leaf, meaning that they were still quite far from their goal.

‘Man, this is brutal!’ Micky spat. ‘Even if a participant manages to gather the leaves in time, how do the organizers expect people to fight after having not slept in three days? Not everyone is like us.’

‘Well… nobody forced us to pick this Decree at this time,’ Percy reminded his friend. ‘We also didn’t have to wait until after the lottery to choose our prizes. Had we started right after the group phase ended, we could have done this at our leisure. Though I guess that the description could have been a bit clearer abou–’

Percy stopped mid-sentence when a pair of living creatures entered the boundary of his Sage's Pond. They wouldn't be the first animals that he and his companions had stumbled upon during this trip, but he was pretty sure that the blurry silhouettes that his secondary domain had registered were shaped like people.

"What the hell?" he asked out loud, for Nawko's sake. "I thought this planet was uninhabited!"

The attendant creased her brow in confusion. "It should be. If you found somebody, they're probably one of the alliance's people, here for maintenance or some kind of mission."

"One of them is a child!" Percy protested.

The last thing he wanted was to delay his task when he was already on a short timer, yet it looked like he would be missing the match regardless, so his curiosity got the better of him. Flying towards the newcomers at full speed, he watched their figures grow more detailed as his Sage's Pond enveloped them properly.

Soon, Percy realized that he had made a mistake, albeit an understandable one. The shorter person wasn't actually a child, but a female Denyte. A rather short and slim individual, even by the standards of her people. She was accompanied by what was presumably her own Maradorian attendant.

'Another contestant, here for the same reason as us?' he wondered.

That didn't sound right. Denytes were supposed to have their own mental-type Decree, weren't they?

And yet, there was no denying the facts. Approaching the sapients by another hundred metres or so, Percy got a chance to examine them more carefully. To his great shock, he actually recognized the woman.

'Zurvanai?!'

Chapter 672: Chance encounter

Percy doubted that Zurvanai's senses were half as sharp as his, but he wasn't exactly flying over the forest in a subtle manner, so the short woman didn't take long to notice him.

She was carrying a basket full of leaves. While Percy didn't bother to count them, he could tell that she had collected more than his host, meaning that she was either already done acquiring the Decree, or about to get there.

'Good for her. It would be a pity for her to miss her next match. Unlike us, she actually stands a decent chance of earning her second core this year.'

Percy could have left her be, since he and the time mage didn't exactly have much to talk about. They had barely interacted since the start of the tournament, and Zurvanai just didn't seem like an overly social person. However, Percy decided to approach her, to ensure that she understood the dangers associated with the prize she had selected.

"Hey! You do know that acquiring multiple mental-type Decrees can fry your brain, right?" he asked upon reaching her, conveniently leaving out the fact that he was trying to do the very thing he was warning her about.

"I'm not an idiot," Zurvanai replied, rolling her eyes. "Our mental-type Decree can be discarded. I already got rid of it before coming here."

Percy couldn't help but frown. He had suspected something of the sort, but he was surprised that she had chosen to replace one of her existing Decrees instead of acquiring a new one. Unlike him, she could probably obtain all of the tournament's free-type Decrees, and she clearly hadn't participated in the competition too many times in the past, so there should be plenty of more urgent prizes for her to pick.

'Maybe her pride got wounded after losing in both events, and she decided to prioritize addressing her shortcomings,' Micky speculated.

'Could be,' Percy replied with a mental shrug, though he wasn't going to pry in the Denyte's matters.

Having confirmed that his fellow contestant wasn't in any danger, he was about to leave. He still needed to collect over a hundred leaves to upgrade his Status.

“You won’t make it in time,” Zurvanai said. There was no mockery, pity, or any other emotion in her voice: just a statement of fact. However, it soon became clear that she wasn’t entirely heartless. “Here. You can have mine. I’ve already obtained the Decree a few minutes ago.”

She tossed the basket up in the air, letting the leaves scatter in the wind.

“Will second-hand leaves even work?” Percy asked, aiming the question at the Maradorian attendants.

Nawko shrugged. “My briefing only mentioned the part about the leaves having to fall off the trees naturally. There was no information about sharing.”

“I’ve accompanied contestants to this planet a couple of times before, so I’m a little more familiar with the rules,” the other Maradorian: a man with indigo-coloured skin and a Blue core: said. “It should be fine.”

“If sharing leaves is allowed, why doesn’t the alliance just store some in a warehouse for participants to borrow when they come here?” Nawko asked.

“They rot away pretty quickly, and trying to magically preserve them messes with the process of acquiring the Decree. There’s probably a way around it, but nobody thought that it was worth the hassle,” her kinsman patiently explained.

Percy nodded, using his willpower to gather up about half of the scattered leaves. He wasn’t sure how many he had collected exactly, but there should be more than enough to complete the requirement. If it didn’t work, he would just destroy them so that he didn’t find them again by accident later, and resume the search from where he’d left off.

The moment the stack of leaves landed in his host’s arms, the sun seemed to grow brighter. It also shifted colours from its original golden hue to a pale white with a faint hint of purple. This had to be some kind of local illusion, since Percy couldn’t see the Decree affecting the whole star on a whim.

Either way, the corners of his host’s lips curled up as a thick column of light enveloped them, the sun’s rays warm but gentle.

‘It looks a bit like Falanor’s mana,’ Micky pointed out.

‘I think you’re right,’ Percy agreed. ‘It’s almost exactly the same, minus a slight red hue. Any god in the Elemental Acquisition stage can theoretically master both the light affinity and its associated concepts, which includes the one related to cleansing infestations. I suppose that this augmented form of light mana is what Ningirima fused with her mind mana to cast this Decree.’

A few seconds later, the beam died down and the sun returned to its previous colour, at least from Percy’s perspective. Much like the previous times he had obtained a new mental-type Decree, an inert seed took root in a corner of his mind, feeling like a second Status that he could open at will.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new Decree: Ningirima’s Decree!]

‘Okay. Our domain and senses haven’t been affected yet,’ Micky noted. ‘We should be able to hold the Decree like this until after the match.’

It would still be a good idea to activate the seed before returning to Remior, since this was what Percy had done on Atlantis and Gallimus. He didn’t know whether that was a necessary step for the assimilation, or whether he would be able to carry the seed back in its current state and only fuse it into his Status after reuniting with his main body, but he saw no reason to mess with a tried and proven process.

‘I got it too,’ Kassorith confirmed.

‘Great. That means we won’t have to start over,’ Percy replied with a mental sigh.

He had been open to the possibility, but he hadn’t expected the spectacle, since the last two Decrees he had acquired from the Void Hand hadn’t produced any obvious phenomena.

Percy wasn’t sure what exactly Nawko and the other bystanders had witnessed, but he now understood that he would have struggled to convince his guide that the acquisition had failed and that they would have needed to spend another three days in the forest.

“Thank you,” he told Zurvanai. “I’ll make it to my next match because of you.”

“Don’t mention it. I had no further use for the leaves anyway,” the Denyte said, gesturing that it wasn’t a big deal. “It’s an interesting Decree, isn’t it? I hope that I won’t be as useless the next time I come across a demonic infestation.”

“Useless? That’s not the word I would choose.” Percy smiled. “Sure, you didn’t win, but didn’t you rank third in that event?”

“You know what I mean,” she replied with a scoff. “I was only able to do well due to sheer killing speed and the fact that I could purge the negative thoughts a little faster through my affinity. No matter how you slice it, I was ill-equipped for that type of contest. That’s why I plan to start practicing runecrafting as well.”

Percy’s smile widened. “You’re being too hard on yourself. We each have our own advantages: you, more than most people.”

Zurvanai shook her head. “You’re not wrong, but fighting against the corruption is an important skill for everyone to hone. I’m glad that I identified this weakness in a controlled environment rather than out there, on a genuinely hostile planet. No excuses would have saved me then.”

Percy considered offering her some polite words of consolation but ultimately decided against it. He didn’t really disagree with the Denyte’s assessment, as he also thought along the same lines. If she wanted to channel her defeat positively, he wasn’t going to dissuade her.

“I look forward to that,” he said. “Maybe we’ll even get the chance to work together one day.”

The short woman sighed. “I wish more people felt that way. This is what we should all be striving towards instead of killing each other.”

Percy frowned, not quite sure where that had come from. Zurvanai wasn’t wrong, but he didn’t want to discuss Void Hand politics with a stranger, and a member of a founding faction to boot.

“I know that the alliance isn’t without its issues, but the tournament is proof that we can cooperate peacefully in some areas, isn’t it?” he asked in an attempt to steer the conversation away from the topic.

Zurvanai creased her brow. “I’m not just talking about the Void Hand. If only we could come to an understanding with the Moirai and the divine beasts, we would be able to reach much greater heights. I just feel that presenting a joint front against the Cardinal Devils makes more sense than squabbling over who gets to keep which Elemental Source.”

The Denyte’s words rattled Percy to his core, causing him to see her in a new light. He sure hadn’t expected to hear such talk from anyone in the alliance: not after what Kassorith had told him about the people of Zath’maan.

The time mage appeared to mistake his silence for something else, however, as a hint of red quickly rose to her cheeks. “I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have spouted such nonsense! The Moirai and Sixiang are our hated enemies and thinking of them as anything else is treason.”

Percy stared at her deeply for several seconds before speaking. “Did you mean what you said? If you were in charge of the alliance, would you do things differently?”

Zurvanai clenched her fists until they paled, probably realizing that it was too late to take her words back. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not in charge,” she muttered, her voice growing quieter. “Not yet, at least.”

Percy nodded as the woman turned around to leave, her attendant following right behind her. He stared at the ground for a minute or two, replaying the brief conversation in his mind over and over again. He knew that Zurvanai had meant everything she’d said. She had no reason to lie to him, and he hadn’t missed the sincerity in her soul.

‘Maybe it’ll be okay if it’s her…’

He glanced up, realizing that the woman had already left his line of sight. He could still see her clearly through his Sage’s Pond, and he knew that she was well within earshot.

“Wait!” he shouted. Zurvanai didn’t reply, but she must’ve heard him, because she halted her steps. “Let’s meet up after your next match! I have a proposal for you!” he continued.

The Denyte resumed walking, but only after nodding faintly.

Chapter 673: Backup plan

‘You can’t be seriously planning to possess Zurvanai!’ Kassorith yelled internally, and not for the first time.

‘Will you pipe down already?’ Percy replied with a mental eyeroll as they stepped onto the teleportation platform. ‘She needs to agree first but, either way, this isn’t any of your business.’

‘Not my business?! We had a deal! Forcing me to pick a Decree I don’t like is one thing but you can’t just ditch me for a different host the first chance you get!’ the Thess’kalan insisted.

After getting beamed back to Maradion, Percy took a break from the internal conversation to thank and bid Nawko farewell. The woman had helped him a lot during his stay, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever see her again, so this was the least she deserved. Only after he and his host set course for the nearest terminal did he bother addressing Kassorith’s outburst.

‘For the hundredth time, my deal was with Metatron, not you. I’m sure that he would prefer that you get a third core too, but I’m the one he ultimately cares about. Me getting the Void Decree might result in an unlimited number of three-cored test subjects. If hopping onto a host with better odds is my only way of accomplishing that, you’ll just have to count yourself unlucky.’

Kassorith seemed about to say something, but Micky jumped into the conversation before he got the chance. ‘It’s not like we chose to screw you over. We gave it our best shot. It just wasn’t enough. Right now, it’s either us and Zurvanai, or nobody.’

The Thess’kalan snorted. ‘Best shot my ass! The only reason we’re in this mess is because you still refuse to use Circulation or unblock my second core! Care to explain how giving the Moirais’ Decree to one of the alliance’s most talented mortals is any better?’

Percy sighed. ‘Sure. If we give up Circulation, everyone will be able to use it. Millions: if not billions: of mortals, ranging from the founding factions’ strongest demigods to the last Thess’kalan child will functionally be half a grade stronger, from now until the end of time. Zurvanai may be talented but she’s just one person.’

What Percy left unsaid was that he wasn’t only worried about sharing the Refined spell. Had it been just that, he might have even relented by now. The problem was that Circulation was only a single step away from the Dance, which might be a step away from something even greater: something outside of his own Carnival or artificial advancement.

It didn’t look like Metatron had figured out the next level of the boosting art yet, but it was probably just a matter of time. Not to mention that the Void Hand had thousands of times the population of the enchanted cube, so they would have countless brilliant people experimenting with the technique.

Based on how Micky’s ancestors had resisted Rhaziel’s invasion: at least for a while: the boosting art likely still held secrets that even Percy wasn’t yet privy to, such as a way for deities to use it.

On the other hand, sharing the Moirais’ Decree carried more of a personal risk for him. He wasn’t worried so much about strengthening the alliance with it, since the extra mana core was something that nobody but him could pass along. The issue was that the Void Hand was at odds with the Moirai, so revealing the Decree might get Percy chased down with pitchforks.

The good news was that Zurvanai had just ditched the mental-type Decree of her people, in favour of one that no surviving deity should be capable of spying on. Percy had also recently acquired a method to ensure the woman’s secrecy. Navigating the negotiations would still be tricky, and it was very likely that he would have to open up to the Denyte in stages, but at least the option was there.

‘When it comes to magic, quality is often more important than quantity. Zurvanai was already going to have two rare affinities, a blessing, and a ridiculous bloodline. Now, you’re planning to make her even stronger,’ Kassorith said, clearly not one to give up easily. ‘It’s entirely possible she ends up being a larger threat than the rest of their gods combined.’

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‘There’s no guarantee that she’ll reach the Concept realm,’ Percy said, metaphorically shaking his head. ‘Even if she does, it’ll be a million years before she’s capable of any serious damage at a cosmic scale, and I might even be capable of stopping her by then. Besides, the only reason I’m entertaining this idea is because she doesn’t seem like the sort of person who would do anything nasty to begin with.’

‘What are you basing this character assessment off? A single conversation? Even if she was honest with you earlier, a person can change greatly in a million years,’ the Thess’kalan pointed out.

Percy mentally shrugged. ‘Well… I was going to give you a third core, wasn’t I? And you’re already a piece of shit. At least Zurvanai hasn’t slaughtered any villages or stabbed me in the back.’

‘That you know of.’

‘That I know of,’ Percy conceded, though he still had no intention of backing down.

Had it been up to him, he would have tried to strike a deal with the Denyte right away. Unfortunately, they’d lacked the time to get everything sorted out before her match, and none of this would matter if she ended up disqualified before reaching the top eight anyway.

‘If you’re done crying, let me focus on the terminal,’ Percy said. ‘Technically, you still have a chance to earn the Void Decree, so you’d better not waste it.’

Kassorith begrudgingly dropped the matter, helping Percy figure out the location of the venue where they would be fighting. They only had about ten minutes left, which might or might not be enough time to fly there: depending on the distance.

Truth be told, Percy considered this battle a mere formality by now. If he had harboured some remote hope of winning earlier, he was now a lot more willing to fall back to his significantly more promising backup plan.

That said, he was still going to do his best in the fight, if only to placate Kassorith. On the off chance that they did win, he could avoid the hassle of dealing with Zurvanai, or he might even channel that opportunity towards a different goal.

Roughly eight minutes later, Kassorith arrived at a stadium that was thankfully located even closer than the previous one. Since there were still sixteen participants in the competition and only eight buildings to host their matches, all the stadiums should currently be in use.

However, the organizers would presumably select the better-looking structures to house the next round of battles, and this one definitely qualified. It wasn't any larger than the stadium that Kassorith's group had used in the second phase, but it did appear to be slightly newer and cleaner.

Ignoring anything unrelated to the fight, Percy and his host slithered onto the stage, finding their opponent already waiting for them, a confident grin plastered all over his amphibian face. He was wearing a set of dark robes that painted a sharp contrast against his pale skin.

"Let the fight between Kassorith and Lohkrat commence," the stadium's cold voice said.

The words were still echoing across the vast arena when the Maradorian used his bloodline to teleport behind Kassorith, pressuring him with a barrage of spectral projectiles. Funnily enough, Lohkrat seemed to favour small knives, not too dissimilar from Percy's Parting Gift. Maybe this was simply the most direct way to accentuate the sharp lethality of their affinity.

Percy was forced to pour every drop of his willpower into a generous layer of metal that Micky produced, allowing it to barely stop the projectiles. Unfortunately, the ethereal blades still dug several centimetres into the material before coming to a halt.

Not satisfied, Lohkrat added a rain of plasma into the onslaught, the scorching projectiles whistling shrilly as they homed in on the Thess'kalan. Defending against them caused the scaled man's core to empty at a scary rate, and he could only even tolerate the rising temperature of his superheated barrier due to his mutation.

Percy didn't get the chance to stamp more than the most basic structural integrity enchantments onto the bulky armour, since he and his companions had their hands full defending against not just one, but two of the deadliest affinities in existence. The fact that both of the Maradorian's mana types were at Blue certainly wasn't making things any easier. Even escaping was out of the question, as there was no outrunning a teleporting mage.

It soon became clear that Kassorith's core would dry up less than a minute into the battle.

Percy didn't feel like waiting that long, having already seen more than enough. Their opponent hadn't even deigned to fuse his affinities, yet a few of his soul constructs had nearly cut into the Thess'kalan's body, making Percy fear for the integrity of his wisp. Even if he hadn't been in danger, he just couldn't see himself counterattacking effectively.

"I surrender!" he shouted, hoping that the arena's enchantment would hear him through the barrage of plasma bolts splashing against his host's red-hot cocoon of molten steel.

"Contestant has conceded. Victory goes to Lohkrat."

Percy sighed, half relieved and half bitter about this outcome. With this, Kassorith's participation in the void tournament had officially come to an end, though Percy hoped that his own work in this city wasn't over yet.

Chapter 674: Contract (1)

Ignoring the roaring crowd, Percy seized control of his host's body and rushed out of the stadium in search of the nearest terminal. Getting eliminated from the tournament just before reaching his goal did sting a little, but he was far more concerned about Zurvanai's result than his own. Kassorith didn't even bother resisting, probably knowing that nothing good would come of it.

Did Percy feel guilty over his plan to ditch the Thess'kalan for a more promising host?

Only slightly. Kassorith had already earned much more from their cooperation than he could have ever managed on his own. He might argue that the same applied to Percy, but there was one huge difference between them.

Given enough years and clones, Percy could have found an alternative way of infiltrating the void tournament. The alliance was famous enough that he would have definitely heard about the Void Decree eventually, and Thess'kala was just one of many member-factions. Meanwhile, his host's corpse would have already rotted away at some remote village on his home planet if not for their meeting.

Pushing any thought of who deserved what aside for now, Percy pulled up the latest information of his fellow contestants, his gaze anxiously landing on Zurvanai's. He'd previously wondered why the

organizers had set up the matches during the group phase to take place on separate days only to have the fights of the much-more-important elimination phase run concurrently, but it all came down to the purpose of each round of the tournament.

Earlier, the competition had placed a lot of focus on information-gathering and strategy, so they had clearly wanted to give the participants a chance to scout out their rivals. This was no longer important, as the final phase was just a straightforward contest of power.

'Her match is still ongoing…' he read with a frown.

Of course it was. It hadn't even been five minutes since the most recent round of battles had started, so it only made sense that most had yet to conclude. How many people would have made it to the elimination phase just to get obliterated mere seconds into their first match?

'Hey! I'd like to see the others facing off against Lohkrat,' Micky protested. 'Mark my words, that freak is going to win the whole thing this year.'

'It's possible,' Percy agreed, though this was no longer any of their business. 'I suppose we should just be glad that he wasn't pitted against Zurvanai. Then again, we might have stood a better chance against anyone else.'

Seeing no point in lamenting what could have been, Percy kept his borrowed eyes glued to the screen, waiting for the conclusion of the Denyte's match. About fifteen minutes later, he decided that it might be best to head to her stadium directly and try to watch the fight by himself.

There was a good chance that the match would be over before he arrived, but that would still be the best location to meet up with Zurvanai, since Percy had no idea where she was staying.

Another seven minutes later, he reached the new venue. The loud commotion emanating from inside the colossal building suggested that the fight had just ended, so he didn't try to enter. Instead, he quickly located the nearest terminal and pulled up the Denyte's information again.

'She won! Thank the gods!' Percy mentally exclaimed.

It no longer mattered whether she lost her next fight or made it all the way to the end. Or well… it might affect Percy's ability to earn additional prizes with her help, depending on the terms of their agreement. However, she had already qualified for the Void Decree, which was arguably the most important reward by far. Percy just had to ensure that he had a clone possessing her when she received it.

'Now what? Are we offering to stick with her for the rest of the competition, or do we only care about the new core?' Micky asked.

'We can bring it up, but it's up to her. The only question is how to safely breach the topic,' Percy replied while circling the building in search of the exit meant for contestants.

A few seconds later, the edge of his Sage's Pond coincidentally caught the Denyte right as she emerged from the stadium. She looked exhausted, with only a couple of transparent strands of magical hair sticking out of her otherwise smooth scalp, yet she was smiling contentedly.

"Hey! Zurvanai!" Percy shouted, waving as he approached. "Congratulations on your victory!"

The woman turned to look at him with a frown. "Kassorith? I suppose that your match was a short one."

He chuckled, though it came off a little hollow. "That's the understatement of the century."

The Denyte nodded. She must have guessed the outcome, since she tactfully chose not to ask about it. "So here we are. You said that you had a proposal for me?"

He sighed, searching for the best way to proceed. He'd actually played this conversation out in his mind dozens of times since their meeting on Zath'maan, so he already had a pretty good idea of what to say. Still, this was a delicate topic, and there was no completely risk-free way to approach it.

"I want to offer you a trade, but the details are quite sensitive, since they involve things about my bloodline that very few people know about," he said, choosing his words carefully.

"I can't agree to anything without sufficient information," Zurvanai protested with a shrug.

“Of course. Are you familiar with Kerfyl’s Decree?”

“Is that the one that creates soul contracts?”

“It is. I want you to agree not to act against me or share any information I divulge, whether or not you end up accepting my request,” he explained.

The Denyte creased her brow, understandably suspicious of Percy’s strict terms. He didn’t blame her, since this was a lot to throw at what was effectively a complete stranger, but there was no way he would talk about his ability to possess her without a guarantee that it wouldn’t bite him in the ass.

Telling her about his bloodline was tantamount to hinting that he wasn’t actually Kassorith, and that he was an outsider who had infiltrated the alliance. Clenching his host’s fists, he gave the Denyte as much time as she needed to decide, fully aware that this was one of the greatest hurdles in his would-be plan.

“I see. I understand that you won’t share the information otherwise, so I suppose that there is no harm in hearing you out,” Zurvanai said a couple of minutes later, much to Percy’s relief. “But I’ll need a few reassurances of my own.”

Having expected that, he nodded, prompting her to proceed.

“I want you to vouch under the influence of your Decree that you have no intention of harming me, my people, or the alliance. In return, I will keep everything you tell me to myself.”

“This…” Percy awkwardly scratched the back of his host’s head. Zurvanai’s terms were more than reasonable, yet he couldn’t agree to them as stated. “I promise that I’m not trying to be difficult, but your phrasing creates a few problems. What I offer will involve some temporary pain. I swear that you will remain perfectly safe and that the outcome will be extremely beneficial to you. As for harming the alliance… it depends on your definition. I admit that we’re going to break a few rules, but nobody will know or be negatively affected.”

Percy didn’t want to be too forthcoming before the agreement was in place, but he had to be honest with Zurvanai, otherwise his own Decree might kill him. Injuring her soul enough for possession would

be an agonizing experience that would technically count as “harming her”, and he was also planning to steal an important Decree from the Void Hand.

If he counted Lanthaniel’s deception, Percy had actually participated in an even more serious crime, but that was thankfully something that had already happened and wouldn’t affect this deal in any way.

“That’s a few too many caveats for my liking,” Zurvanai said.

“I know.” Percy sighed. “Just a reminder that these are merely the terms for you to hear me out. If you don’t like my actual offer, you can still decline later, though I sincerely doubt you will.”

Zurvanai eyed him carefully before extending her right hand, clearly having a good idea of how Kerfyl’s Decree was supposed to work. Percy reciprocated the handshake while tugging at a certain facet of his recent acquisition, activating its main effect.

Something inside his soul stirred, a thin tendril reaching out from his wisp and worming its way through the gaps in his host’s soul, towards his palm. The Denyte’s soul responded in kind, stretching and touching Percy’s where their skin connected. A certain understanding settled between them, the words that they had previously spoken now binding them far more deeply. Whichever party violated them would suffer horrific consequences.

What Zurvanai didn’t know, was that the deal was somewhat lopsided. Percy and Micky shared a single soul, thus were both liable to pay the price should either of them betray the Denyte. However, their main bodies hadn’t agreed to anything.

The original Percy and Micky had yet to even acquire the Decree, so they would probably be fine if the clone got himself killed here. Not that he had any intention of putting this to the test. He still wanted to trade with the woman in earnest, and he would rather not miss out on all the prizes that he had already claimed from the tournament.

“Well?” Zurvanai asked, breaking him out of his thoughts. “Can you finally stop being so mysterious?”

Before saying anything sensitive, Percy carefully scanned his surroundings with his Sage’s Pond. Only after confirming that there was nobody within a couple hundred metres did he dare to reply.

“Long story short, I want your help to claim the Void Decree. I believe that I can do that without anyone knowing, and you’ll be generously compensated for your assistance.”

The woman looked at him confused. “The Void Decree? Is that it?”

Chapter 675: Contract (2)

“What, is the Void Decree not valuable enough for you?” Percy asked back, a little surprised by the Denyte’s nonchalance.

Zurvanai shook her head. “It’s not that it’s not valuable. I just don’t see why you’re in such a hurry to get it. Can’t you wait until next year? With your skills, I’m sure you’ll earn it after a few attempts, without having to break any rules.”

“I have my reasons,” Percy replied vaguely. “Will you help me or not?”

The female Denyte appeared genuinely conflicted. On one hand, she didn’t seem to realize that helping him get the Decree was as big of a crime as he knew it was. On the other, she clearly didn’t want to get in trouble over nothing either.

“Define what you mean by ‘generously compensated’,” she said after a few moments of silent deliberation.

Percy briefly considered how to phrase his response. “I’m not sure that either of us will receive what I hope we will, but I promise you that you’ll walk away with at least as many gains as me.”

He didn’t go into detail, but he knew that Zurvanai was getting the better end of the deal. If the Void and Moirais’ Decrees didn’t stack, neither party would obtain a third mana core, yet the female Denyte wouldn’t really lose anything.

On the flipside, she was more likely to end up with a new core if the Decrees did stack, since she and Percy would be using her body. Percy already knew that he could pass the Moirais’ Decree to his hosts, though he sadly had no idea whether the Void Decree could be brought back to Remior.

“I’m struggling to see what could be valuable enough to match the Void Decree or be worth the risk, though I have no reason to decline if you’re willing to guarantee the truthfulness of your words as part of our contract,” Zurvanai conceded with a shrug. “How is this going to work?”

Percy couldn’t help but tense up. This was another major turning point in the negotiations.

“My bloodline allows me to place a piece of my soul in another’s body, possessing them. I’ll need to inflict a few… rather painful… cuts on your soul first, but I’ve done this thousands of times and I swear that you’re going to be completely safe. And that’s it. You just have to acquire the Decree with my clone inside your body, and hope that it spills over to me. I’ll give you something equally valuable back simply by possessing you, but you won’t know what exactly it is until after you accept my terms.”

“Possession?!” Her eyes widened in realization as she leapt back. “You! You’re not Kassorith!”

“Kassorith is still in here, alive and healthy,” Percy hurriedly said. “He’s a little annoyed that he got eliminated from the tournament, and even more so since I’m negotiating with a new host, but he’s otherwise fine. Better off than when I first met him, even.”

“Who the fuck are you?!” Zurvanai demanded, sounding genuinely hostile for the first time since the start of the conversation. Percy hadn’t felt anything off yet, but he could tell that she was barely holding herself back from activating her bloodline.

Sadly for her, she had already agreed not to attack him, regardless of what information he revealed. Lifting even a single finger against Percy would be the same as forfeiting her life.

“Calm down. I’m only offering you this deal because you said that you’re open to working with outsiders. Was all of that just a bunch of hot air?” he asked.

The Denyte frowned, Percy’s words having clearly struck a nerve. “Are you honestly going to talk to me about cooperation after deceiving me, possessing one of our people: like a parasite: and infiltrating our alliance?”

Percy shook his borrowed head. “Like I said, Kassorith was more than happy to participate in the tournament and earn a bunch of Decrees with my help. He’ll get to keep them and resume his life after I leave.”

Obviously, Percy conveniently left out the part about his host fleeing to the Vault, along with the spy who had escorted him here. This was a whole other complication that didn’t need to be brought into the discussion.

“That just makes him a traitor! It doesn’t make you an ally!” the woman protested.

“Fair. But I haven’t hurt anyone either,” Percy argued back.

“What about all the contestants you’ve disqualified?” Zurvanai asked. “The way I see it, every prize you have claimed should have belonged to somebody else.”

“Not really. There’s no limit to the number of participants that can get through the preliminaries, and Remlat told me that he doesn’t care about the rewards that much anymore. There’s only one person who would have made the top half of the group if not for me.” Percy sighed. “I’m sorry about that, but you said it yourself: most of the void tournament’s participants can try again next year. I only had this one chance, so I did what I had to. Not everyone gets to be born in a peak faction, princess.”

Zurvanai’s gaze eased, but only slightly. Percy had practically admitted that he had originated from a world that wasn’t a threat to the alliance, which had probably played a big role in that. However, it didn’t seem like she was going to let him off the hook that easily.

“Be that as it may, we aren’t a charity. I’ll only ask you once: where are you from?”

“It doesn’t matter how many times you ask. I won’t tell you,” Percy said, leaving no room for debate. “If you are worried about the threat that my people may pose on yours, don’t be. I’m from a much weaker world that you’ve probably never heard of. We’re worse off than even Kassorith’s planet, though I’ll have to keep the details to myself for our safety: whether or not that ruins any chance of striking a deal with you.”

Percy extended his host's hand again, and Zurvanai grabbed it after a moment of hesitation. As soon as their palms connected, he activated Kerfyl's Decree to volunteer an additional clause into their contract, stipulating that everything he had told her had been the truth.

The Denyte finally seemed to calm down. "Let's say I believe that you're just an opportunistic scavenger who snuck past our defences and gathered a bunch of our scraps. I still don't see why I should willingly leak our most precious Decree to an outsider, regardless of how insignificant your origins may be."

Percy shrugged. "What is there to be scared of? You're one of the alliance's most promising mortals. How many mages do the Moirai or Sixiang have who are more talented than you? Even if this had been one of them, they wouldn't necessarily gain more from this deal than you: let alone a random person from some backwater planet."

"That only works if you genuinely give me something of equal or greater value to the Void Decree. I have yet to see any proof of your claim," the Denyte corrected him.

"Let the contract take care of that. I promise to provide adequate compensation. If I'm lying, I'll be dead and no longer your problem. If I'm not, you just have to give me a ride until you acquire the Void Decree, and we can both go on our merry ways."

Zurvanai fell silent again, hopefully considering his offer seriously. Percy had revealed as much as he could, painting everything in the best possible light, all while avoiding any blatant lies.

Thankfully, Percy wasn't obligated to reveal that he wasn't as beholden to his vows as the Denyte thought, nor that he genuinely believed himself to hold just as much potential as any of the peak factions' mortals.

'The worst she can do is say no,' Micky spoke through their connection, clearly trying to relieve some of Percy's stress. 'She can't touch us until we're gone, and we've earned more than enough rewards to celebrate.'

'Only if the alliance doesn't have the means to free those under the influence of a contract,' Percy replied. 'I don't think she'd be able to do it in short order, but we may have just made it harder to infiltrate the Void Hand again in the future.'

Despite saying that, Percy didn't regret trying. Even if he had postponed his attempt to claim the Void Decree, he would have still had to trust one of the alliance's people later, so the situation wouldn't have been any different. Zurvanai seemed like the sort of person he could work with, she was already just a step away from the prize, and Percy had taken every precaution possible.

The Denyte sighed. "You will only possess me right before the ceremony, to minimize the odds of anyone noticing. You won't get to interfere in my battles or earn any rewards besides the Void Decree with my help, and you'll only survive long enough to bring it home if you give me something genuinely valuable enough. Furthermore, you are not allowed to force your will over me or do anything strange to my body, unless I act against you first."

Percy's borrowed heart skipped a beat as Zurvanai offered him her hand once more. Activating Kerfyl's Decree, he amended the contract one final time, figuratively signing the agreement into existence.

Chapter 676: Assimilation

If it hadn't been for his deal with Zurvanai, Percy might have considered leaving Maradion already. Kassorith hadn't qualified for the Void Decree, so there was no other reason for him to stay in the floating city until the end of the competition. Every second he spent there was a risk.

Thankfully, Lanthaniel and Kassorith hadn't been caught yet, but they'd already involved themselves in several suspicious situations. Be it the Thess'kalan's extraordinary performance in the tournament, the strange disturbances that Ishkuria had caused on Tanarill on his behalf, the mysterious circumstances behind Kassorith's betrayal of his people, or whatever skeletons the divine spy had hidden in his closet over countless millennia, there were plenty of vulnerabilities that could expose them.

Percy knew that it was only a matter of time before somebody decided to investigate his host properly. If it hadn't happened already, it was probably because nobody had imagined that Kassorith could escape from Maradion at a moment's notice via Metatron's Decree. From an outsider's perspective, there would be plenty of time to look into, detain, and interrogate the Thess'kalan later.

This was also the main reason why Percy and the pentapus hadn't discussed the possibility of repeating their infiltration of the alliance the following year, even though Kassorith wouldn't have much trouble earning another ticket from the regional tournament on Tauros.

It was simply safer to assume that their cover would be blown the moment they fled Marador Prime.

Consequently, Percy's past few weeks in the capital had been extremely stressful. After discretely following Zurvanai back to her inn, he had asked his host to book a room much closer to hers, so that he could keep an eye on her more easily.

Between the strict terms of their contract and him tracking her movements, it would hopefully be difficult for her to figure out how to get around Kerfyl's Decree to alert somebody about Kassorith.

Percy's Sage's Pond was admittedly not great for spying through closed doors. Walls and other solid surfaces significantly impacted its range: especially when he couldn't freely deploy his domain out of fear of being noticed, and the inn was filled to the brim with concealment runes. However, he was at least able to tell when Zurvanai was in her room, and whether she was talking to somebody or meditating in silence.

The fluctuations of her soul were luckily both the most informative data points, and the ones easiest to keep track of under these circumstances. They wouldn't tell Percy anything too specific about the woman, but he would hopefully notice her plotting out a betrayal.

'How much longer until we're done?' Kassorith: who had nothing to gain and everything to lose at this point: groaned. 'I'm tempted to open a portal to the Vault and get us the hell out of this place.'

'If you do that, you'll have to explain to Metatron why you abandoned Lanthaniel outside of the agreed upon time and with no warning. Just wait a little longer. The next couple of matches should be over by the end of the week,' Percy said.

Zurvanai had passed through the quarterfinals too, and she had done so rather easily. Sadly, her luck had finally run out when she got pitted against Lohkrat in the semifinals.

Percy had expected the two-cored Maradorian to approach the fight much like Remlat had, by using his teleportation bloodline to stay outside Zurvanai's range, and attacking her without mana.

It might have even worked: especially if the soul and plasma mage happened to possess Insomnia, or any other spectral trait that bolstered his endurance in some way. However, Lohkrat hadn't bothered with such cowardly tactics. He had chosen to fight Zurvanai head on, overpowering her with brute force.

The Denyte's mana devouring bloodline was insanely strong, but not without its limits. It needed time to disassemble a hostile spell. Not much time, and Zurvanai could accelerate the bloodline's effect further through the clever application of her affinity, but the strategy that had felled countless participants up to that point could apparently be overcome with enough speed and volume of attacks.

Fusing his affinities, Lohkrat had launched a brutal barrage of extremely fast soul-burning projectiles at her, further boosted by his free-type Decrees. The female Denyte had managed to nullify many, but not all of them. Due to their extreme lethality, the few knife-shaped bolts of spectral plasma that had landed had dealt more than enough damage for the stadium's enchantments to jump to Zurvanai's rescue.

'I bet that she would have been able to defend against that if she had awakened her second core already,' Percy had said at the time, though he wasn't too hung up on the result.

There was only one match left in the semifinals, after which Lohkrat would undoubtedly destroy his final opponent and claim the championship. When that happened, Percy would be allowed to possess the Denyte and claim the Void Decree, and then hopefully leave this place in one piece.

'It's such a pity that she didn't let us place a clone in her body right away,' Micky complained. 'It would have made keeping tabs on her so much easier, plus we might have even earned another reward after her last victory.'

Percy mentally shrugged. They'd gone over this already, but it couldn't be helped. He was honestly counting his lucky stars that he had gotten Zurvanai to agree to even the terms that she had, let alone anything more.

Besides, Percy didn't really have much more to offer her in exchange for another Decree. Nothing that he was willing to part with, at any rate. The crimson powder wasn't bad, but it wasn't a good fit for the woman's fighting style, nor could it be compared to a titan's handiwork. He wasn't going to teach her Circulation either, for obvious reasons, and his Sage's Eye would be gone the moment he stopped possessing her.

Furthermore, there were only a few Decrees that Percy would be able to bring home. He doubted Zurvanai could be swayed to change her picks for his sake.

Outside of his dealings with the Denyte, Percy had tried to make the most of his remaining time on Marador Prime, with varying degrees of success. He hadn't been able to unearth the location of any other interesting resources through the terminals, nor had he managed to get any other planets marked, but he had made a rather interesting discovery while spying on the other participants.

Generally speaking, everyone in the city was extremely secretive while cleansing their cores. The alliance was a melting pot of countless factions, and many of them possessed unique alchemical brews or interesting techniques that they didn't want their rivals to learn. This was doubly true of the founding factions that wanted to maintain their superiority over the rest of the alliance. For several months, Percy had failed to learn anything useful, and not for a lack of trying.

Unfortunately for the Void Hand, their mortals still needed to cleanse their cores daily: multiple times per day, in fact, as Percy had verified: so one of them had eventually made a mistake. It was one of the eliminated contestants, a seemingly scatterbrained Inimit, who had decided to cleanse his core without ensuring that his door was completely sealed.

In the winged person's defence, there weren't many people from the weaker factions left in the city this late into the tournament, and those from the other founding worlds were probably already privy to his secrets. Furthermore, even though powerful sensory bloodlines or other similar abilities were common in the alliance, the odds of somebody spying on him during his cleansing session had admittedly been minuscule.

Percy hadn't missed the opportunity to slip his Sage's Pond through the crack in the enchanted door. Allowing his senses to unfold, he had enveloped the unsuspecting Blue's body, observing his every action.

Sadly, Percy's snooping hadn't revealed anything new, but he had confirmed something that he had previously suspected: those from the founding factions: or at least the Inimits: didn't drink regular elixirs, but rather a turquoise fluid akin to Aurora Dew.

Kassorith had once told him that the leaders of the alliance had become greater springs long before acquiring their World Tree saplings, and Percy's latest discovery was further proof that they had originally achieved their lofty status in the same way that Remior was about to.

'Shit. Do you think Kassorith saw it too?' Micky had asked.

‘I don’t think that he was paying any attention to that guy, so hopefully not,’ Percy had replied.

The last thing they needed was for Metatron to find out how to accelerate the promotions of his mortals. At least, the pentapus wouldn’t have more than the colour of the elixir to work with. Even the additional cleansing sessions had happened behind closed doors, outside Kassorith’s notice.

Leaving what his host had or hadn’t seen aside, Percy was quite disappointed that the Void Hand didn’t seem to possess any other means of extending their lifespans. He had originally hoped that there was something else that he didn’t know about, but any additional boosts might have allowed them to turn their Red-borns into gods: something that had supposedly never happened in the universe before.

Percy’s main body was almost done setting the groundwork for his artificial advancement, so they would likely know the result by the time the clone returned to Remior. Possibly sooner.

Should their efforts fail, their largest obstacle to attaining divinity would remain unsolved. The first-generation teabags that Ishkuria had given Percy, and the third core that he was hopefully about to get would help, but they wouldn’t be enough.

‘If it doesn’t work, we’ll have to go hunting for greater springs again, and it seems that a whole bunch of them: including many of the most advanced worlds: won’t be of any use to us…’

He sighed, not looking forward to that outcome. However, he decided to drop the matter for now. There was no sense in stressing over something that might end up not being an issue.

A few days later, he was about to meet with Zurvanai to enter the next phase of their agreement. With most of his business on Marador Prime concluded, and with no further need for his enhanced senses or superior domain, Percy finally turned his attention to something that he had postponed since Zath’maan.

‘Here goes nothing,’ he said to himself, willing the inert seed in his mind to activate at last.

He braced himself for a major headache, though he was pleasantly surprised when he suffered nothing of the sort. Even the notification appeared to have changed slightly since Gallimus:

[Overlapping functionality detected. Calibrating Phoebe's Decree. Status will remain partially unavailable while the assimilation is underway.]

Technically, there was only one additional word in the description: "partially". A quick test revealed that Percy was still unable to pull up his page, and the range of his Sage's Pond had shrunk slightly, though it hadn't disappeared entirely. His domain had also grown weaker, though it was still more intense than his host's.

'That's good,' he thought, heaving a sigh of relief.

Phoebe's Decree kept getting better at assimilating other mental-type Decrees with every new one it devoured. Percy would still rather avoid getting into a fight in his current state, but that might not be as much of an issue in the future. At the rate his Status was growing, it would probably be able to instantly digest new Decrees sooner rather than later, possibly without even requiring Percy's clones to reunite with the main body first.

'Hopefully after another upgrade or two… Now, let's go grab our third core.'

Chapter 677: Zurvanai

Zurvanai let Kassorith into her room before sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor. To her credit, she didn't seem very worried that Percy might hurt her, her face appearing as still as a lake.

'I suppose that she trusts the terms of our contract to protect her,' he reasoned.

Reaching out to his main body, Percy waited for confirmation that a new clone was on its way, flying in the direction of the cord. He had done his best to bother the original as little as possible over the past several months, but he hadn't been able to avoid disturbing himself entirely.

Marking some of the Void Hand's most important planets had been worth the interruptions, and so was possessing Zurvanai to acquire the Void Decree: the primary goal of this entire trip.

The main body hadn't always had a spare cord at hand, since he hadn't wanted to keep a piece of his soul idle for over half a year. However, he'd always had the option of retrieving the clone inhabiting his

familiar's body. Pausing his training with Nephthys for a few hours every now and then had been a small price to pay.

As soon as a trickle of freshly-fused phantom mana reached the clone, he gathered some to his host's right hand and shaped it into a small knife. He used it to carve a series of precise incisions across Zurvanai's body with practiced ease, keeping her injuries stable with Kassorith's other hand.

The woman winced, though she didn't let out a squeak.

Percy wasn't sure whether she had experienced soul injuries before or had simply primed herself for the ordeal, but he definitely approved of Zurvanai's grit. Thankfully for both of them, her suffering didn't last long.

The new wisp arrived about half an hour later, slipping into the largest cut he could find in the Denyte's soul. The two versions of Percy worked together to stitch up Zurvanai's injuries, placing her on a fast track to a complete recovery.

With that out of the way, the clone in Kassorith's body bid his counterpart and new host farewell, slithering back to his own room. He was finally free to relax for a few hours until the conclusion of the Decree acquisition ceremony, after which both clones would leave Maradion together. Everything else was now the new guy's problem.

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'What an interesting bloodline…' Zurvanai muttered through their connection. 'Do you go around stealing stuff from random people around the universe?'

'I prefer the word "trading",' Percy replied with a mental shrug. 'We have a contract and everything, don't we?'

The truth was that this version of Percy had only been briefed about said contract recently: an agreement that he wasn't personally bound by. In fact, this was actually his first meeting with Zurvanai, though the other clone had brought the main body: and thus him: up to speed.

Percy already felt like patting his counterpart on the back for his brilliant decision to pick Kerfyl's Decree. Having the option of shooting White- or Clear-grade spells at Machaon would have been nice, but the ability to establish soul contracts with his hosts was already paying dividends.

Oblivious to Percy's feelings about his new Decree, the woman rolled her eyes. 'That's only because you failed to reach the top eight without my help. I'm sure that you would have been more than happy to grab the Void Decree and everything else within your reach without asking for anyone's permission, had it been an option. Besides, something tells me that Kassorith didn't exactly volunteer to get possessed.'

'He definitely did the second time,' Percy corrected her. 'Even the first time, he wasn't exactly against it, since the alternative was certain death. It was only after I saved his life that the ungrateful prick decided to renege on our deal.'

'Whatever you say…' Zurvanai sighed. 'Well… I've let you into my body, as agreed. Time for you to pay up.'

'I already have.'

The female Denyte frowned, standing up and stretching her muscles for a few seconds, seemingly examining the changes in her body. Eventually, she paused upon noticing something.

'This omnidirectional vision of yours… it's… wow. A lot of the things you did during the tournament suddenly make a lot more sense,' she said, though she shook her head the very next second. 'It's not a bad ability to have in a vacuum, but it's not enough to pay for a new mana core.'

'Good, since you won't get to keep my Sage's Eye after I'm gone,' Percy replied with a spectral chuckle. 'Your prize is actually the very first thing I ever obtained through my bloodline: the Moirais' Decree.'

Zurvanai's eyes widened, a wave of shock rippling through her with enough force to nearly tear some of the freshly-woven stitches holding her soul together. 'You're not joking.'

'I promised compensation on par with the Void Decree. How about something that is widely considered to be even better?'

The female Denyte had to spend the next minute or two calming herself down before she could speak again. ‘I can see why you refused to tell me what it was until now. Had I been in your shoes, I’d have been too scared to utter the words in this city too. I can’t believe you stole from a peak faction and then had the balls to steal from their rivals too. Though “greed” or “madness” might be better words.’

‘Call it what you want, but I’ve upheld my end of the deal. I suggest you start heading towards the location of the ceremony before you miss it and the contract rips your soul to shreds.’

Zurvanai nodded grimly, exiting the inn and walking towards the building with the short-range teleportation platforms. However, it didn’t seem like she was done interrogating Percy just yet.

‘How is the Moirais’ Decree supposed to work? I don’t feel my new core.’

‘It takes a lot of life mana to repair the seed in your abdomen. Possibly mind mana too, once I’m no longer in your body, though I don’t think that it’s going to be difficult for you to acquire either. I would have provided you with a bunch of healing potions, but this might not be the best time for you to activate the Decree,’ Percy explained.

The woman creased her brow, clearly realizing what he meant. ‘Shit. How am I going to explain this to anyone? Wait… how did you hide Kassorith’s second core? And how do you even know that the two Decrees will stack?’

‘You go first. Tell me what you actually know about the Void Decree, since it’ll greatly affect how we approach this,’ Percy replied. ‘I’ve been able to piece together a few details by myself, but I still don’t understand the full picture.’

Zurvanai appeared to consider it for a few seconds. ‘It’s not an accident that you weren’t able to learn more. The alliance tries to keep the details confidential, to prevent our enemies from using the information against us. I know that the Void Decree is also granted in a somewhat incomplete state and has to be manually activated, but I’m not familiar with the method. We are supposedly free to select any affinity we want, though most people pick pure mana and use a rare affinity-changing treasure to upgrade it.’

‘Why not pick a rare affinity directly?’ Percy asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ the woman admitted. ‘It must have something to do with the price that has to be paid.’

‘What could be more expensive than a rare affinity-changing treasure?’ he asked again.

Zurvanai mentally shrugged.

Percy fell silent for a few minutes, trying to come up with a plan that would work for both of them. During that time, his host reached the building with the teleportation platforms, where she found a male Ollorian with a single Blue core waiting. Apparently, Zurvanai and the disfigured man were the only contestants who had reached the top eight this year and didn’t have the Void Decree already.

There weren’t any Violets or Whites, as anyone talented enough to earn the Void Decree would usually do so long before advancing. Percy wouldn’t be surprised if a Violet who had failed repeatedly in the previous grade occasionally got lucky after their promotion, though it probably didn’t happen often.

An attendant led them to a room at the top floor, and onto an enchanted platform which would presumably beam them somewhere else on Marador Prime. Right as Zurvanai was about to step on the device, Percy finally gave her his answer.

‘Okay… here’s what we are going to do. We’ll grab the Void Decree and hope that it plants a third seed inside your body. If it doesn’t, this whole thing has been a waste of time and there’s no reason to discuss anything else. Whether or not it works, you’ll repair the Moirais’ Decree to activate the core in your abdomen and pretend that it’s from the Void Decree. As for your third core… it’ll have to wait for now.’

Zurvanai didn’t seem happy about that. ‘I can’t control what affinity I get, can I? What if it’s a common one?’

‘Not the worst that could happen. If I were you, I’d be praying I don’t end up with another time core,’ Percy said.

The female Denyte gasped. ‘Is that a thing?’

‘Well, the odds of that happening are extremely low, but not zero. To be perfectly honest with you, I’m still not sure why the Moirais’ Decree is held at a higher regard when it doesn’t give you a choice, but I suppose that there’s something else that we don’t know.’

‘But what am I supposed to tell my people? Nobody intentionally picks common or composite affinities: especially one of the few candidates who has a chance of becoming a seven-elemental goddess in the future.’

‘I’m sure you’ll figure something out.’

Percy knew that he was coming across as an apathetic jerk, yet he genuinely struggled to feel bad about Zurvanai potentially “only” having two rare affinities rather than three, or having to keep one of them hidden for a while. The randomness of the Moirais’ Decree was something that his main body and all of his hosts had always had to deal with. Not to mention a given when it came to the first affinity of almost everyone in the universe.

‘Say that you wanted a head-start in the Elemental Acquisition stage or something,’ he suggested. ‘It’s not the most convincing excuse, but what are they going to do about it? It’s only temporary anyway. Feel free to reveal your third core whenever you want and to whomever you trust. I don’t care if you want to admit that an outsider helped you obtain the Moirais’ Decree, but wait until after I leave and don’t say anything else about me.’

‘Wait. If you pass it automatically to your hosts, Kassorith must have had it too,’ she realized. ‘How did you…?’

‘We used a concoction to conceal his second core, but I don’t have any to give you,’ Percy explained.

His counterpart in Maradion did have the recipe and a bunch of seeds inside his spatial seal, but he hadn’t had the opportunity to cultivate them yet, and he wasn’t going to request an extra set of ingredients from Metatron for Zurvanai’s sake.

Percy was broken out of his thoughts when the attendant activated the enchantment on the teleportation platform, beaming the trio to a new location.

Chapter 678: Sacrifice

The teleportation platform sent Zurvanai inside a cavern dimly illuminated by a few enchantments on rough, stone walls. The cavern was open behind her, though the space outside was pitch black, despite it still being daytime in Maradion.

Percy initially thought that they had been teleported to a different side of the planet, though his Sage's Pond soon revealed a few additional details that made him reconsider that assumption.

A wall of pressurized water was held at bay by an invisible barrier to prevent the cavern from flooding, in a manner not too dissimilar from how the air in the space station had been kept from leaking out.

Letting his senses seep into the dark waters, Percy spotted several misshapen fish with large, fanged jaws, luminescent lobes, and other strange features that would have been entirely out of place closer to the surface. Scanning the cavern more carefully, he noticed a few puddles of seawater trapped in the uneven ground, complete with the occasional crustacean-like critters nibbling on tiny debris.

"Are we at the bottom of the ocean?" Zurvanai asked.

"We are," the attendant confirmed. "You can acquire the Void Decree deeper inside the cavern, though only one of you may enter at a time. I'm afraid that I'm not allowed to accompany you past this point."

The female Denyte nodded, turning to the other contestant. The Ollorian returned her gaze with a kind smile, wordlessly encouraging her to go first. Percy thought that it was a really nice, gentlemanly gesture, though the man's asymmetrical mouth lined with multiple crooked teeth had made his smile somewhat creepy.

"Thanks," Zurvanai muttered, taking her fellow participant up on his offer. Percy didn't have any complaints either. The sooner they acquired their prize, the less time there was for something to go wrong.

The cave narrowed into a winding and rather claustrophobic tunnel that seemed to stretch for several hundred metres, though that wasn't a long distance for a Blue. Percy's senses had easily reached the end of the corridor before his host had even entered it, though something at their destination appeared to interfere with his Sage's Pond, preventing him from examining it properly.

It wasn't until Zurvanai stepped into a much wider room that Percy was able to get a better look. The extreme density of ambient mana dwarfed even that on the rest of the planet, forcing him to shift his attention away from Mana Sense and lean more on his regular sight.

'What the hell?! How did they get such a thing in here?!' he couldn't help but ask.

He and his host were inside some kind of ring-shaped garden that was over eighty metres wide. The tall grass and vibrant flowers reminded Percy of Ishkuria's Decree, making him question whether they had been teleported back to Tanarill.

Most strangely, the stone ceiling was gone, having been replaced by a clear blue sky and a bright yellow sun that illuminated the plants. The stale, salty air of the cavern had given way to fresher scents.

Percy knew that all of this was fake and that they hadn't left the bottom of the Maradorian ocean, because the sleek, rocky walls of the cavern still surrounded the garden. Despite being able to see the upper edge of these walls, Percy's senses couldn't peer above and behind them. He was tempted to try flying over them to find out what would happen, though he understood that he and his host had more important things to worry about.

Both the garden and the blue sky hanging over it were limited to a thick band in the exterior of the room. A couple dozen metres deeper inside, a different landscape unfolded: a pool of molten lava: also ring-shaped: stretching beneath an ominous red sky.

The interruption in the sky made Percy wonder whether the sun would be visible on the other side of the garden. It couldn't be a real star, but it was unclear whether the illusionary object would follow a person as they circled the ring-shaped patch of greenery.

Deeper still, the scorching sea of liquid rock gave way to a futuristic-looking metallic disk that was densely covered with pulsating runes. The enchantments were individually inferior to the Vault's magiscript, but the sheer number of minuscule runes that the Void Hand's deities had packed onto the platform was dizzying to look at. A second disk hovered high above the first, forming a distant ceiling that Percy felt he would never be able to reach, regardless of how long or how fast he flew.

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‘It has to be a Decree,’ Zurvanai guessed.

‘Not just one,’ Percy corrected her. ‘Look at them.’

He gently took control of his host’s right hand to point at a couple of statues. One was standing in the same garden as Zurvanai, albeit at a spot on the other side of the sea of lava. It depicted a male Inimit, his features as smooth and perfect as Ishkuria’s had been before her decision to mutilate her internal world.

The second statue was sitting atop the magma. It had to be heavier than the red-hot liquid, yet it refused to sink by so much as a single millimetre, almost as if the lava itself didn’t dare devour its creator. This one was of a female Ollorian, though Percy couldn’t spot any flaw or blemish on her smooth, voluptuous body.

Scrutinizing the sitting woman, Percy thought that Ollorians looked disturbingly similar to humans from Remior after being freed from their deformities: perhaps a little paler and with facial features arranged slightly differently. Of course, he doubted that they had any true relationship. It was probably through sheer luck that a few species of sapients among billions ended up developing in a similar direction.

Having come across several gods and statues of gods before, Percy could tell that the two in the cavern weren’t mere pieces of art, but actual deities that had somehow been turned to stone. Judging from their calm expressions, this had been a voluntary sacrifice.

‘But how did they get here?’ Zurvanai asked again. ‘Inimits and Ollorians shouldn’t be able to set foot on Marador Prime, unless they were born or ascended to divinity on this planet.’

‘Maybe that’s exactly what they did,’ Percy replied with a mental shrug. ‘Or perhaps, the Inimit god cast his Decree elsewhere, turning himself into a statue while creating the garden. Since he was no longer alive, they were able to move him to a different planet, where the Ollorian goddess did something similar. Finally, they were both brought here, along with their creations.’

He was by no means an expert in divine magic, so he couldn’t be certain why the alliance had done this, though he did have some guesses. The petrified titans couldn’t be the main creators of the Void Decree, since they weren’t siblings, yet they could have still participated in the process.

Metatron had explained that casting collaborative Decrees was extremely difficult, but he had also said that the trio of titans responsible for the Void Decree had likely received a lot of indirect help from other gods. This was how they had made up for the rare affinities they had lacked, compared to the Moirais' triplets.

Perhaps, they had asked other titans to stack certain infrastructure-type Decrees on top of one another, nudging the laws of reality closer to what was needed for the main spell. Percy didn't know why the others had to sacrifice themselves though. Maybe they hadn't been able to meet the requirements of their colleagues otherwise.

All of this only served to hammer home the idea that the Void Decree wasn't just an isolated achievement: like most other Decrees tended to be. It had been a long and purposeful endeavour from dozens, if not hundreds of deities, who had banded together out of sheer desperation.

Percy could almost picture the four or five founding factions: however many had been active at the time: coming together in the aftermath of the war for the World Tree. Realizing that the Moirais' superiority would only keep growing due to their twin cores, they had decided that the only way to a brighter future had been to imitate their rivals.

And the rest was history.

'Wow… I wonder how many titans they had to sacrifice during trial and error, until they got everything to work,' Micky said, though he made sure that only Percy heard him, since they hadn't bothered to introduce him to Zurvanai.

The female Denyte shrugged, walking toward the centre of the room. Percy didn't think that she didn't care about the sacrifices of her ancestors, but she'd probably decided that she would honour them better by inheriting the fruit of their labour than uncovering the mysteries of its creation.

It was a sentiment that Percy shared, though he suddenly felt a little glad that Kassorith had failed to reach this point. Unlike the other Decrees he had claimed from the tournament, he might have felt a little guilty snatching this one without giving something back to the Void Hand, and granting a third core to one of their most talented mortals definitely counted.

Crossing the garden was trivial, and traversing the ring of magma wasn't much harder. Using their mana and willpower, Percy and Zurvanai shielded themselves from the heat while stabilizing their footing. They also had to hold their breath, to avoid inhaling the toxic fumes that spilled out of the occasional bursting bubble.

Upon stepping onto the metallic platform, Percy scanned his surroundings in search of a hint towards what they were supposed to do, though it soon became clear that the titans had everything else covered. The enchantments on both disks flashed brightly, a tangible, multi-coloured pillar of light linking them together, with Zurvanai trapped inside like a bug in amber.

Chapter 679: Concluded

With very little warning, the woman's skin began blistering and peeling off, a wave of searing pain seeping into her muscles and bones. The unpleasant feeling was accompanied by a pounding headache that affected even Percy, despite him being a mere guest in his host's head.

Zurvanai suffered through the ordeal with gritted teeth, though she didn't voice any complaints. Percy, on the other hand, was hardly even fazed by the pain, having experienced far worse things before.

If anything, a surge of excitement rose through his wisp upon confirming that the Decree had affected him as much as it had his host.

'Let's not count our eggs before they hatch,' Micky warned. 'Just because the Decree is doing something to us, it doesn't mean that it's going to stack properly with the Moirais' Decree or follow us back to Remior.'

'Of course,' Percy agreed, though he couldn't help but feel quite optimistic.

After several months of scheming and fighting for his third core: not to mention roughly a decade of daydreaming about it: he was finally on the cusp of success. The more the Decree altered his very being, the more confident he grew in his odds of keeping it.

If there was one thing that felt a little off, it was that the light column had yet to do anything to his wisp. From his experience with the Moirais' Decree, he knew that his soul had to be involved in the process of acquiring a new mana core in some way, much like his mind and body.

‘Metatron did say that only two of the titans had the right affinities,’ Percy reminded himself. ‘I suppose that soul mana was the one element they were missing.’

As if on cue, the ring of lava suddenly shifted, the dense liquid flowing clockwise like a raging river of destruction. At the same time, a breeze seemed to gently sway the flowers and grass in the garden in the opposite direction.

Percy didn’t understand how the Decrees were supposed to help, but the changes in the outer rings revealed their purpose soon enough. The colourful beam enveloping Zurvanai intensified, burning her mind and flesh twice as fast as before.

With great difficulty, she dragged her forearms through the almost-solid air, bringing them in front of her face. She used them to further shield her already-closed eyes as what remained of her skin got crisped into charcoal.

Most importantly, the pain in their body and minds finally reached their souls, though it did so in a rather muted manner. Percy could tell that none of the titans: be it the three siblings responsible for the main Decree, or the countless others who had helped them: were able to affect his soul directly.

Instead, the group of deities appeared to have simply strengthened its connection to his mind and borrowed flesh, indirectly allowing the Void Decree to touch the last facet of his existence that it needed to affect.

Over the next few minutes, the beam slowly died down, leaving behind a charred mess of a woman. Before Percy had the chance to check his host’s condition, a most awaited notification flashed within the darkness of Zurvanai’s incinerated eyes.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new Decree: Void Decree!]

‘Thank the gods! It fucking worked!’ Percy mentally exclaimed, suddenly finding himself on the verge of tears.

He felt the urge to plop down and rest, though that would have to wait until he returned to Remior. His current body didn't belong to him, and even the tiniest movement sent a wave of pure agony rippling through Zurvanai's flesh.

Fortunately, the titans who had designed this place weren't cruel enough to leave the participants in this sorry state. The metallic disks flashed green, enveloping the short woman in a new column of monochromatic light. The beam was gentler than before, its touch soothing Zurvanai's burns without restricting her movements.

As expected, the dense life mana caused the seed in the Denyte's abdomen to stir, giving rise to a vortex that tried to devour the light before it healed her. The good news was that the alliance's deities hadn't been too stingy with their mana, providing their inheritors with several times more than necessary for a complete recovery.

A few seconds later, Zurvanai was back on her feet, her charred exterior crumbling away to reveal a layer of smooth skin. Percy withdrew his senses to respect his host's privacy as she reached into a spatial device that had survived the destruction and pulled out a new set of clothes to wear.

At roughly the same time, her second core finally stopped leeching off the green pillar, reaching saturation shortly before the runes on the metallic disks dimmed.

After making sure that his host was going to be alright, Percy shifted his attention back to his latest acquisition. Along with the notification, he had received an instinctive understanding of how the new Decree was supposed to work.

However, the information was currently in a fragmented and chaotic state. He could access a bunch of incoherent words and sentences individually, though he would probably have to spend a few hours sorting everything out before he could figure out how to activate the new core.

'Real classy of them to give us another puzzle to solve right at the very end,' Micky said with a mental groan.

'I don't think it was intentional,' Percy said, coming to their rescue. 'They were probably too busy trying to get their Decree to work. Bundling it with a proper instruction manual likely hadn't been high on their list of priorities.'

‘Fair enough,’ the Huehuan conceded. ‘Let’s sift through the fragments carefully after returning to Remior. If we try to activate the Decree here, it might not work a second time in our own bodies.’

‘Agreed,’ Percy replied with a mental nod.

‘I believe this concludes our deal,’ Zurvanai said, unknowingly intruding in their private conversation. ‘I just felt some of the restrictions on my soul loosen. Only the confidentiality clauses remain active.’

‘Same,’ Percy lied through non-existent teeth.

He hadn’t felt anything, since this version of him wasn’t actually bound by the contract, though he guessed that his counterpart had fulfilled his end of the deal as soon as he’d helped him possess the woman.

‘Are you sure you don’t want us to work together during next year’s tournament?’ Percy asked, deciding to try his luck one final time.

‘Depends,’ Zurvanai replied with a smirk. ‘Do you have any other valuable Decrees to give me in exchange for my cooperation? Or are you just trying to use me to steal more rewards from the alliance for free?’

Percy sighed, knowing that this was it. Truth be told, he wasn’t too sad about missing out on the tournament’s other prizes. There were a few decent free-type Decrees that he would still like to acquire in the future, but only a couple that he could obtain without visiting Marador Prime with his main body, and neither of them was too urgent to have.

The rare affinity-granting treasures were also nice, and Percy wouldn’t mind having a couple to upgrade his second: and possibly third: cores, but those were things that he could potentially find elsewhere. It wouldn’t be easy, but he could cleanse and promote the magical organs just fine with weaker affinities until then.

He was honestly more annoyed that possessing Zurvanai didn’t seem to have given him her ancestral Decree, and that he hadn’t found a way to visit Denytos IV. Ironically, Percy had managed to mark

planets belonging to as many as four founding factions: even including the long-destroyed Zath'maani: and yet he had somehow failed to set foot on what was arguably the most important one.

Unfortunately, there was no good way of convincing his already-suspicious host to bring him close to their Rings of Sacrilege. Unlike the Void Decree that she had tacitly agreed to help him earn, Percy could potentially cause a lot of irreparable damage to the alliance by stealing one of the priceless artifacts.

'Oh well… we've marked enough worlds to have good access to the Void Hand in the future. I'm sure that we'll figure out a way to get there on our own,' he told Micky. 'Besides, we got what we came here for, so we should be celebrating.'

With a mental shrug, he bid Zurvanai farewell, removing his wisp from her injuries. A part of him was curious to know what affinities the woman was going to awaken, but he couldn't justify staying at such a dangerous place any longer while carrying such a precious haul.

In any case, he was sure that he would meet the Denyte again. She had been an absolute monster with just a single mana core, and she had just acquired not one but two more. There was no way that such a talented figure would fade to obscurity.

As the cord pulled him back to Remior, Percy asked his main body to get the clone possessing Kassorith to leave as well. While this clone had never met that Lanthaniel guy personally, he knew that the god had asked his counterpart and the Thess'kalan to stay on Marador Prime until they obtained the Void Decree: which was now.

With that, Percy's business with the Void Hand had concluded for the time being. All that remained was for the Lone Wanderer's scattered pieces to reunite and consolidate their gains.

Chapter 680: Ancient realm

Zurvan watched as his subordinates tested and measured the effect of his latest creation. They were located inside a vast laboratory that stretched for hundreds of metres, filled to the brim with the most expensive equipment that money could buy, as well as that which it couldn't.

What the titan had produced wasn't a new spell per se: just the most recent iteration of his third Decree: something that he had originally cast half a million years ago. Having run out of more creative

names, he had dubbed this one “Slumbering Deity’s Decree”. It was an object-type that had bought their older gods and goddesses a lot of extra time, so nobody felt like complaining.

He didn’t enjoy having to enchant each coffin separately, since it was a long process that lasted several years, but casting the Decree at scale would have greatly weakened its effect. At least, the objects would last forever: unless a powerful deity deliberately tried to destroy them: so spending a few centuries to upgrade them all would help the alliance greatly.

That said, Zurvan would only bother replacing the coffins if the new model proved significantly better than the previous one.

“What does the chronometer say?” Fodthal asked as he scrutinized the enchanted coffin with great interest.

The latest model was smaller and more barebones than the previous one, but the deities who used it wouldn’t be conscious, so the lack of comfort was a small price to pay if it resulted in a stronger effect.

“0.0034!” Mekina replied, her three-coloured hair fluttering excitedly.

Having recently reached the peak of the Self-Discovery stage, she had completely mastered the fire, air and light affinities, with both her internal world and the magical mane granted by her ancestral Decree reflecting that.

A deity’s internal world already contained several times more mana than a demigod’s core, so the extra storage capacity provided by the Decree would have been negligible in its original state. Fortunately, the Denytes’ ancestral Decree had been designed with that limitation in mind, developing a new function upon its owner’s ascension to the Concept realm.

Mekina’s hair didn’t just contain some Clear mana: it actually housed a portion of her internal world, allowing it to grow to twice its regular size in the same amount of time and at no additional cost.

Fodthal nodded approvingly, though his own thirty-one coloured hair remained much calmer. “A deceleration of nearly three hundred times. That’s roughly fifteen percent slower than the previous iteration. Lord Zurvan… you have outdone yourself once again.”

Slowing down the flow of time was admittedly much easier than accelerating it, but even the most powerful titans rarely managed a deceleration of over a hundred-and-fifty times. Zurvan had already been hailed as a universal genius upon first revealing a stasis coffin with a two-hundredfold deceleration, yet he had never stopped working to improve it.

The titan sighed tiredly, not nearly as enthusiastic as his subordinates about his grand accomplishment. “Better or not, it’s still just a half measure.”

His own scalp was smooth, despite his mastery of six base elements, or thirty-two stable combinations. Unfortunately, he had ascended to divinity long before their ancestral Decree was cast.

“Lord Zurvan… this is still extremely important for our deities. It might just buy us enough time until somebody figures out how to safely reach the next realm,” Fodthal said.

Zurvan nodded. It was a common misconception that gods were immortal. It was true that their bodies didn’t age or get sick, but a different timer loomed over their heads. It was several times longer than what mortals had to deal with, but finite all the same.

At over three million years old, Zurvan was also getting rather close to his own expansion. After reaching the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage, the growth of his internal world had slowed down for a while, as he had stopped adding concepts to it for hundreds of thousands of years. However, it had already grown large enough that he often had trouble controlling it.

In the next million years or so, it would tear his body to shreds, turning into a true world and forcefully elevating Zurvan to the flawed Ancient realm. In theory, his power would grow by several times, but the process would rob him of his sense of self, turning him into another planet eternally orbiting a star of his choice.

Due to his mastery of the five common affinities, he would likely turn into a large and healthy planet, where life might flourish one day. His lack of the life affinity might delay the emergence of life, but his mastery of the time affinity would probably accelerate the earlier stages of the planet’s development.

All things considered, becoming an Ancient was a noble end. Every living creature in the universe relied on those that had come before them to exist, so this was just part of the cycle of life and magic.

However, there weren't many deities who were happy with the idea of losing their individuality and becoming mindless rocks that would swat aside any foreign Concept mage who approached.

The Ancients did experience odd glimpses of lucidity every now and then, but they were short lived and barely allowed them to interact with the creatures that they had birthed.

'I should probably start using the coffins too,' Zurvan thought.

The sooner the better. Using his latest creation, he could stretch his remaining time to roughly three hundred million years, which was more than enough for the universe to experience countless changes.

After all, the currently recorded history barely spanned a twentieth of that. Nobody knew what had happened to the factions that had comprised the previous generations of deities: the ones whose celestial bodies all the current factions had emerged on.

What the Void Hand and their rivals did know, was that they had no intention of sharing the fate of their predecessors. After the first few mishaps with gods exploding into new planets, most factions had recognized the necessity of placing their older deities in stasis. This was something that both lesser and greater springs did: at least the ones that had interacted with other worlds enough to know what was in store for them.

The difference was that weaker factions didn't have the luxury of powerful titans with time affinities casting specialized Decrees, so they had to make do with much more limited enchantments that only achieved a fraction of the deceleration and had to be replaced or maintained often. It wasn't a problem yet, but those gods were bound to run out of time a lot sooner than those benefitting from Zurvan's handiwork.

Zurvan wouldn't be able to continue his research while asleep, though the alliance would at least be able to wake him up in case they got into a war or required his help with some major project.

The hope was that future generations of gods would figure out a solution to the problem. Many believed that learning how to acquire rare elements and entering the third major stage of the Concept realm was the answer, though nobody knew how exactly it was going to help.

The best-case scenario was that mastering every known element would automatically stabilize one's internal world in some way, fundamentally changing what came next. Alternatively, there might be several hidden stages between the two realms, and obtaining rare elements was just the first.

There was also a chance that there was a solution out there that had nothing to do with rare affinities, which was why the peak factions tended to diversify their research into several frontiers: studying rare or calamity affinities, developing new Decrees, breeding mortals with interesting bloodlines, and many more.

Finally, it was possible that there was no solution regardless of what anyone did. That losing their individuality and turning into planets for new people to live on was simply how things were meant to be.

Perhaps, the deities of the previous era had simply accepted the inevitability of their demise. After trying countless things and failing to find the answer, they might have chosen to surrender to their fates and let the cosmos begin anew.

Zurvan didn't believe that. He felt that anything and everything was possible with magic, so he chose to place his trust on his successors. The only reason he hadn't commenced his slumber yet was…

"Do we have any news from Maradion?" he asked.

"Ah!" Fodthal slapped his forehead, showing more emotion than he had after their successful test. "Apologies, Lord Zurvan. Your daughter arrived earlier today. I was planning to inform you, but I got too carried away by our experiments."

"How did she do?" Zurvan asked.

It was rare for a god as long-lived as him to have only sired a handful of children. For the longest time, he had been too preoccupied with his magical training to even consider starting a family.

Unlike his colleagues, he didn't think that being a proper father to his children was any less important than leading the alliance, and he had been too busy to do both. Consequently, he had refused to have offspring until the end of the Elemental Acquisition stage had been in sight, and until there had been many other talented gods in the alliance to take over most of his responsibilities.

Of the two sons he had fathered over a million years ago, only Ervan had managed to attain divinity. Most gods would be thrilled if half their children followed in their footsteps, but Zurvan had been heartbroken to see his first-born wither away. This was why he hadn't dared to father another child until recently.

Once his first and only daughter came into the picture, the titan had decided to delay his slumber a little longer. Whether or not she managed to attain divinity, Zurvan had every intention of being around through the entirety of the girl's life as a mortal.

"She lit up the Seventh Circle in three of the five tests during the first phase, ranked second in her group during the second phase, and made it to the semifinals during the elimination phase. It was the eventual champion that took her out, so there is a good chance that she could have been the runner up if she'd been a little luckier with the draw," Fodthal patiently summarized.

"Send me the recordings later. I want to watch all of it," Zurvan said with a nod, though he frowned upon noticing something strange in his subordinate's words. "If there was only one person stronger than her in the whole tournament, how did she end up second in her group? Was she unlucky enough to be placed in the champion's group as well?"

"No, Lord Zurvan. She lost to a strange Thess'kalan who had been escorted to the tournament by a god from Tauros. They both fled Marador Prime shortly after the conclusion of the competition, after which we discovered that the deity was one of Metatron's spies. Apparently, he has defected from Tauros a very long time ago and has been feeding information to the Vault since. We would have probably not uncovered his betrayal if not for his recent movements."

"Interesting. So, this mortal not only defeated my daughter, but was worth Metatron giving up on one of his spies to send him to the tournament?" Zurvan asked.

"Well… he didn't defeat Zurvanai directly. Kassorith actually conceded without even fighting her and didn't last a minute in the elimination phase. His combat strength is exceptional for a member of a weaker faction but still falls short of the tournament's top brass. He owes most of his success to his extraordinary performance in the special events," Fodthal explained.

"I see…" Zurvan said.

He honestly didn't care that much about Metatron's antics. That bottom feeder was more of an annoyance than a genuine threat, and a single mortal wouldn't really change the fate of the artificial world anytime soon, no matter how talented.

"I should also mention that Ishkuria got involved with the Thess'kalan before his treachery was uncovered," Fodthal added. "She's come forward with this information herself, apologizing for helping him."

Zurvan clicked his tongue. "I swear that woman is too obsessed with her research. I understand her desire to improve her Decree: it's a useful one: but rare affinities are more important. What did she give him?"

"Just some first-generation tea from her personal stash, and a magical aid meant to help him study the storm affinity. It didn't cost the alliance much, but she did injure herself to produce her gift."

Zurvan nodded. "A small loss. Maybe this will teach her not to act as impulsively in the future. What was she thinking? Trying to go around our rules? Getting involved with an unknown mortal from a shady background?"

"Should we issue any further penalty?" Fodthal asked.

"Let her be. Foolish or not, Ishkuria has done a lot for the alliance. Besides, it sounds like she's already paid enough of a price for her mistake," Zurvan said. "What of my daughter's second core? Have you prepared the criminals?"

"There's no need. She already activated it before returning to Denytos II, though she refuses to say how."

Zurvan couldn't help but crease his brow. He had no idea how his daughter had found enough sacrifices on Maradion, nor why she wouldn't talk about it. At the same time, he knew that her morals would have prevented her from harming innocents, and he trusted that she had a good reason to keep her silence.

“Did she go for space or karma in the end?” Zurvan asked, recalling that the girl had been torn between the two elements before leaving for the competition.

“Space. She awakened a pure core and claimed the rare affinity-changing treasure as her reward for reaching the top four of the tournament. I reminded her that we could have provided her with one if she wanted to claim a different prize, but she wouldn’t hear it,” Fodthal said.

Zurvan smiled with pride. His daughter was now a time and space mage!

If the Ancients willed it, she might even be the one who would one day prevent her old man from turning into a mindless chunk of dirt.