Wanderer 681

Chapter 681: [Redacted]

‘I can’t believe that we are about to go through with this!’ Percy mentally exclaimed. ‘Ready to make history?’

He was currently sitting on his bed in the settlement, while Micky was staying in his own place in Twilight City. They had both engraved a bunch of additional soundproofing runes on their walls, in case what they were about to do got a little noisy.

They had finished preparing the seals inside Percy’s first core a few days ago, the crystalline walls of the organ currently covered in tiny, interlocking unit cells made solid through magic.

The microscopic constructs were rather fragile individually, but it was a different story once they were activated. In theory, the runes should reinforce each other as much as they did the magical organ that housed them, while the core should also help them stay in place, thus creating a powerful feedback loop.

Neither of the two spherical layers would be strong enough to contain mana of a higher grade on its own but, together, there was a chance.

The flexible connections between the runes should further absorb some of the pressure, and the self-repair enchantments would hopefully quickly replace any odd seal that happened to degrade or get destroyed, before it caused any issues.

All that remained was to put the nascent spell to the test.

Percy and Micky had been itching to do so for a while now, though they had decided to perform a few last-minute experiments on a core-sized cauldron first, to ensure that everything worked as intended.

Just as they had been about to take the final step and repeat the compression process inside Percy’s sternum, the clone on Marador Prime had requested help to possess another host, which had kept them occupied for another few hours.

Now that everything had been settled, they would hopefully have a few peaceful minutes to complete their ambitious project before the clones returned. They had to do this now, because Phoebe-knew how busy they would be after receiving all of their rewards from the tournament.

'I'm ready if you are,' the Huehuan replied, already willing the crow constellation in their shared mindscape to merge into the human's.

Percy didn't resist, allowing the stars to rearrange themselves into a cloaked figure, the personalities to fuse, and the Lone Wanderer to come to life once more.

Wasting no time, the new entity pushed the Dance to its limits, saturating every corner of the human body: and even the grey wisps that danced wildly around it: with soul mana. He had fashioned the seals inside his sternum out of regular soul mana, and he was planning to construct the ones in his abdomen out of pure mana, since he wanted to upgrade his cores one at a time.

However, the adaptation runes should allow the enchantments to function just as well after consuming phantom mana, theoretically allowing him to circulate the fused resource through both cores in the future. Not only that, but the hope was that the unit cells would automatically upgrade themselves from Yellow to Green halfway through the artificial advancement, allowing them to withstand the extreme pressure more easily.

Once the human body's channels were unable to contain another mote of mana, the Lone Wanderer willed the enchantments inside his sternum to activate.

Countless runes hummed with magical power at the same time, a violent shockwave reverberating through Percy's bones and muscles. The thrice-amplified structural integrity enchantments were the first to settle, laying the groundwork to withstand what the Lone Wanderer was about to do.

The flow runes helped him direct the mana into and out of the correct channels, taking over part of Percy's Circulation pattern. Over the past few years, he had taught himself to keep his boosting art always active like Micky, because he knew that it would be an important component of his artificial advancement. However, he had decided to have the enchantments automate a part of the process, to lower the odds of making a costly mistake and injuring himself.

Thankfully, the full Dance was only required during the artificial advancement itself. After Percy elevated his grade, he should be able to dial his boosting art down to just the internal part, meaning that he wouldn't have to go around surrounded by glowing ribbons for the rest of his life.

The fact that his channels would have to remain saturated with mana was still a little annoying, but he would just have to treat them as an extension of his core, and mentally adjust the minimum level of mana that he was allowed to have inside his body at any given time, so as to avoid losing control of his boosting art.

Once both the seals themselves and the mana flow were stable, the Lone Wanderer activated the pressure runes. The enchantments turned on and off at set intervals, introducing a rhythmic oscillation in the organ.

It was the same thing that Percy had to do when compressing his potions to the next grade, though the Lone Wanderer had set the runes up to produce the oscillations automatically, after performing countless experiments outside his core to figure out the correct frequency and amplitude for his mana.

He had made up for the absence of gravity ingredients by taking advantage of the willpower within his own mana. Pressed from both inside and outside, a few Green strands started forming inside the core.

Sadly, these strands were short-lived, collapsing back to Yellow almost immediately. Worse still, the Lone Wanderer could already feel the strain on his enchantments. A few seals crumbled, though they were replaced by new ones before the damage spread. The crystalline walls of the actual organ started cracking too, though the damage was thankfully still negligible.

Knowing that he wouldn't be able to complete his promotion like this, he activated the rotation runes as well. A tiny hurricane formed within the organ, spinning even faster with some help through pre-casting.

The mana pushed against the reinforced walls even more violently, causing the enchantments to fall apart faster than before, and the organ to crack dangerously. However, the Lone Wanderer's gambit wasn't without its upsides.

Pressed tightly together, the Green strands latched onto one another, twisting into thicker bands that didn't come undone as easily. The volume of mana inside the organ plummeted as the Green colour began to dominate, since it was thrice as dense as that of the previous grade.

The Lone Wanderer was forced to push even more Yellow mana into his core to fill the vacuum.

The immense pressure threatened to crack the organ open like an egg, at least until the seals began to greedily drink some of the Green mana that they had just helped create. The adaptation runes caused the enchantments to restructure themselves, allowing them to withstand more pressure and to slow down the destruction of Percy's core.

However, it wasn't enough.

Percy and Micky had been operating under the assumption that their Green mana would eventually start affecting their bodies like a regular promotion would, strengthening their flesh and expanding their lifespan: which was the whole point of this endeavour.

That hadn't happened yet, and unless it did, the seals inside Percy's core wouldn't be able to permanently contain the potent mana by themselves.

Gritting his teeth, the Lone Wanderer kept pushing Yellow mana into the human body's sternum, watching with bated breath as it got converted into Green. Over half of his reserves had been upgraded by now, which should have been more than enough to induce a change if this had been a regular promotion.

'Shit. Were we wrong after all?'

Just as he was mentally debating whether to stop before he caused irreparable damage to his core, his muscles surged with new strength. His senses also grew a little sharper, his thoughts clearer, and his soul more sublime.

These were the same changes that he would have expected from a true advancement, though they had come with a delay and weren't nearly as pronounced. They were modest. Reluctant. Almost as if his flesh hesitated to rebuild itself in this manner.

Still, the faint wave of euphoria coursing through the human body rekindled the Lone Wanderer's hope. More importantly, his core received enough assistance from the incomplete advancement to further resist the spread of the cracks, allowing him to keep going.

After about two thirds of the mana inside the organ got converted, the changes grew more evident. They accelerated as he neared a hundred percent of his core's capacity and didn't stop once he crossed that threshold. Instead, the potent resource spilled into the rest of his mana network, slowly filling up his channels.

That was when the Lone Wanderer understood what had happened.

A natural advancement required a mage to convert a hundred percent of the Yellow mana inside their core into thirty-three percent Green mana. That was the threshold were the physical enhancements would normally kick in.

However, this was an artificial promotion, and one that included Percy's mana channels, treating them as an extension of his core. His capacity was essentially double what it should have been, which was why the changes hadn't picked up the pace until he had filled sixty-six percent of the organ: or a third of his body: with Green mana.

Only once his channels were full to the brim did his Status finally speak.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Spectral Art: Internal Seal-Crafting: Masterful + Spectral Art: Intimidation: Masterful -> Spectral Art: Cradle of the Savage Gods: Masterful!]

[Congratulations! Your mana core has advanced: Yellow -> Green!]

Chapter 682: Cradle

Percy separated his mind from Micky's, tiredly falling back on his bed. There was still a lot that they had to unpack, both regarding the spell itself and the changes that it had brought to his body, but he decided to take a moment to revel in his achievement.

'We've done it! We're the first mages in the universe to force a core advancement!' he exclaimed through the cord, his heart racing.

Technically, it was possible that some remote faction had also succeeded without anyone knowing, but Percy felt that this was the kind of thing that even the Void Hand and their rivals would have been hard-pressed to keep under wraps.

Admittedly, he could already tell that his promotion wasn't without its flaws, but the fact that Phoebe's Decree had treated it as a true advancement meant that it was close enough to the real thing.

'This is even bigger than the Aurora Dew or your ability to pass the Moirais' Decree to your hosts. We'll have to be careful about who finds out,' Micky warned.

'Of course.' Percy sent a mental nod back.

His elixirs could also elevate a lesser spring into a greater one, but the cyan powder was a secret that the peak factions were likely already aware of. Furthermore, the process of producing the ingredient and mixing it with stable beast mana was quite simple.

As for Percy's ability to give people extra mana cores… it wasn't necessarily less impressive than forcefully promoting them, but it was something that only he could do, only to one person at a time, and only by essentially stealing the achievements of other people: namely, the Moirais' triplets.

The Cradle of the Savage Gods, on the other hand, could potentially change the lives of countless people, and was entirely the creation of him and Micky. They had pieced the intricate spell into existence after weaving together insights from several different places: the Huehuans' boosting art, the Vault's magiscript, the Felmarans' pre-casting, the Atlanteans' spherical cauldrons, and the compression principle that the Amenthei had discovered.

Even with those sources of inspiration, Percy and his fellow aspect had trained for decades to reach this point, though they hadn't always known that this was what they had been working towards. They might not be titans: not even close: but the spell they had just registered could potentially shake the cosmic order more than most Decrees.

If there was one thing that Percy didn't like about the Cradle, it was that his Status had named it a Spectral Art. This was usually a badge of honour, as it indicated that a spell was more powerful and exotic than it would have otherwise been, though it was more of a liability in this case. It implied that

those without Percy's traits would be hard-pressed to learn it, which wasn't ideal, since this was meant to be a direct upgrade of the Dance.

Percy could still potentially help one of his relatives promote their cores after possessing them and crafting similar seals inside the organs, though he would first have to grow more proficient with their affinities, and then spent months coaching them and preparing for the advancement.

This currently made the spell even harder for him to spread than the Moirais' Decree, though he understood that this was temporary. It should technically be possible to construct the seals without the Scribing trait, but it would be a monumental challenge for even the most skilled enchanters.

Without the Insomnia trait, the Cradle's users would have to learn to keep their boosting art running while asleep. This was another limitation that wasn't a complete deal-breaker, since Micky had figured it out in the past, but it still made the spell less accessible.

'I suppose that the day we manage to get rid of the words "Spectral Art" from the spell's name will be the day it can be considered a direct upgrade of the Dance,' Percy reasoned, though that was more of a long-term goal.

Funnily enough, his Status hadn't registered the Cradle as an upgrade of the Dance, because the latter had already previously fused into the Carnival and, later, the Symphony. That said, it was clear that Percy's boosting art remained at the core of the spell, arguably playing an even more important role than Internal Seal-Crafting or Intimidation.

As the fusion of three Masterful spells, the Cradle was undoubtedly at the very pinnacle of the tier, much like the Carnival and the Symbel of the Savage Gods had been before merging into something even stronger. However, the Cradle didn't overlap with the other upgrades. It existed in its own lane, and could hopefully be used in parallel to the Symphony, once Percy and Micky were done promoting their remaining cores.

Outside of the enchantments that had been necessary for the artificial advancement itself, Percy and his fellow aspect had included many auxiliary runes into their unit cells.

The concealment runes, combined with controlled-reversal runes, should allow him to tamper with how others perceived his grade. After playing with the enchantments for a few seconds, he confirmed that he could mask his core by making it appear at Red, Orange, Yellow, or even hide it entirely.

Alternatively, he could do the opposite, posing as a Blue, Violet or White: to potentially intimidate an opponent that might be too difficult to fight: though it didn't seem like he could pretend to be a demigod just yet.

Initially, he had been worried that this ability would have been restricted to the core, but wouldn't extend to his channels. Thankfully, he had since come up with a way to solve that problem. He simply had to peel off a few seals from the organ, replicating the minuscule grains and letting them propagate through his channels. That way, he could circulate them through his body and spread their effect to the rest of his mana network.

He had also included heat runes that he could use in a similar manner, freely warming up or cooling down his body, and lightness runes that he could use to make himself slightly lighter or heavier.

Finally, he had incorporated soul resonance and purification runes into his unit cells, and he was planning to add copies of the corresponding elements to the other cores, to hopefully make all of his and Micky's mana types slightly more potent, while also giving them some resistance to demonic infestations.

After his clone's performance in the void tournament, Percy knew that the purification runes weren't omnipotent, but this was all the more reason to try and squeeze out every drop of power he could from them. Instead of merely applying them to his weapons and armour, it wouldn't hurt to directly add them to his mana itself, before he even allowed it to leave his core.

Whether this would be enough to protect him from the corruption or allow him to cleanse an infected creature more easily remained to be seen, though Percy didn't regret giving it a shot.

'Hmmm… is it me, or does the promotion still feel a little off?' he wondered after examining his body for a few minutes.

Percy felt that his strength and lifespan had increased as much as they were supposed to, though the core itself felt like it was still halfway between Yellow and Green.

Perhaps that was only to be expected, since the impurities that had prevented it from naturally advancing were still technically lodged within its crystalline walls. The promotion had strengthened it enough to resist the monumental pressure of the next grade, but its ability to absorb and produce Green mana still felt somewhat muted.

If it hadn't been for Percy's boosting art helping the organ, he could tell that it would instantly revert back to Yellow: if it didn't explode and kill him first.

Deciding that it was better to test his limits while he was still in a safe environment, Percy slowly expelled some mana from his core and channels, feeling the changes. Fortunately, he could get rid of nearly half of his current reserves without anything bad happening, but the mana began feeling slightly unstable when he tried going lower than that.

'Okay. It's not ideal, but this is something I'm going to have to live with,' he said with a sigh, having honestly expected some downsides from the beginning.

With any luck, once he upgraded his second core as well, its feedback would push his body closer to the true Green grade, allowing his mana networks to remain functional with even less mana.

Another issue was with the boosting art itself. Percy's core and channels could create and handle Green mana without too much difficulty, though the grey wisps burning outside his body were less effective. Percy's external flow was visibly comprised of a mixture of Green and Yellow mana, making him notably weaker than he would have been after a natural advancement.

'The Cradle essentially boosts my core by a grade and a half,' he concluded after a few more tests.

It was like he had jumped from a Yellow with the Dance to a Green with just Circulation. If he deactivated the external flow and only kept the internal one, he would be more like a regular Green, or like his previous full strength.

It was a bit of a bummer, because it meant that Percy and Micky were limited to a single artificial promotion per core. They had known that this would probably be the case, but they had held some hope of being able to repeat the process endlessly: using their Green mana to reach Blue, their Blue mana to reach Violet, and so on.

Evidently, that had just been wishful thinking. They would have to cross the rest of the Colour realm the good old way.

Fortunately, Percy's artificial advancement shouldn't interfere with his regular core cleansing. The network of seals coating his core was full of holes and grooves that he could loosen at will to let his elixirs seep into the organ itself. Since the seals were made entirely out of Percy's own mana, the deattuned beast mana shouldn't damage: or even interact with: them in any way.

Percy had even included an alternative setting in the controlled-pressure enchantments that he could activate to damage the walls of his core like the Cascading Cracks technique did, exposing their flaws and helping him target them with the beast mana.

Part of him was itching to test that functionality right away, but his core had suffered a lot of damage during the promotion, so it would be safer to give it a few days to recover before doing anything else. Losing a few cleansing sessions was a small price to pay, given the colossal step closer to divinity that he had just taken.

'Awesome. Now we just have to do this three more times: preferably before Machaon decides to attack,' Micky said.

'Four,' Percy corrected him. 'Don't forget about Nephthys.'

Technically, it should be five, since the reincarnated goddess had two cores as well. However, they had decided to leave her beast core alone for a while, until they confirmed that the promotion would stick without issue.

If the Ruby Princess' first core advanced to Blue, it would force her body to evolve. Should the seals fail later and cause her to revert to Green, she would probably die, since her body would lack the mana to sustain itself. Micky also possessed the beast affinity, but he could manipulate the size of his body at will, so this shouldn't be a problem for him.

'Make that seven then. If the Void Decree works for all three of us, we'll each get another new core,' the Huehuan said, making Percy smile wryly.

They knew that upgrading their new cores wouldn't be as urgent, as they would start off multiple grades behind the others, making them practically useless in the fight against the patriarch of House Asclepius. Percy and Micky weren't going to neglect them, but they wouldn't be in a rush to promote them either.

Outside of their own cores, Percy might try helping out a few of his relatives at some point, though promoting Archibald's first core to White was the only project that might be worth the effort in the short-term: assuming that they could make the process perfectly safe for his grandfather. The Starry Queen was in the same boat, though she had the same problem as Nephthys, and Percy would rather not put her life at risk.

He sighed, realizing that his next few years would be quite busy.

Covering his first core with seals had taken way longer than he would have liked, though he hoped that he and Micky would get the next three done several times faster. Everyone else would have to wait, and maybe he should be lumping his familiar in that group as well. Her strength wouldn't be enough to turn the tide against Machaon just yet.

Either way, they still had a few other pressing matters to take care of before they got started with all of that. Two of his cords were shaking violently, indicating that his clones were about to return, and they had come back from Maradion bearing quite the assortment of gifts.

Chapter 683: Gains

One of the first things that stood out as Percy's wisps fused back into his soul was how easily his Status finished assimilating Ningirima's Decree. Something seemed to click inside his head almost immediately, resolving the conflict between the two pieces of divine magic.

While Percy hadn't been worried that the process would fail, he had expected it to be at least somewhat uncomfortable, and to last longer than a couple of seconds. Evidently, the clone's copy of Phoebe's Decree had already done most of the work.

'It feels a bit like how a spider pumps its prey full of venom, to partially digest it before even consuming it,' he thought.

It wasn't the most pleasant analogy, but it did make Percy wonder how important his bloodline's role had been in the evolution of his Status. He didn't want to downplay Phoebe's contribution too much, since her Decree was undeniably more adaptable than other mental-types, but it might have never grown to this point if Percy had lacked the means to devour new Decrees in multiple stages.

Back when he had tried to assimilate Ea's Gift, his clone's Status had broken down entirely. After reuniting with his main body, he had regained access to an intact version of Phoebe's Decree, essentially giving his Status a second chance to repair itself and absorb the mangled mess that had returned from Atlantis. Even under those favourable circumstances, it had barely succeeded.

Nowadays, the situation wasn't nearly as dire. Percy's Status had grown powerful enough that it would probably have an easy time absorbing new Decrees in anyone's hands. Even so, that initial step might have been the key to everything else that had followed.

Shrugging, Percy decided to place all matters and speculation regarding Phoebe's Decree on hold. Part of him itched to pull up his page right away, but it would make more sense to do that after processing the rest of his gains.

Next up on his list were the clones. After placing a new one in his familiar's body to resume his training with lightning and acid mana, he sent out two more in random directions, asking them to do whatever they wanted.

With all the greater springs that he had recently marked, on top of several other important tasks that had been begging for his attention: such as his long overdue return to Melodia: Percy might have been better off planning some deliberate adventures. However, he was too busy with other matters to care about that right now, so he didn't mind letting his clones wander aimlessly for a while.

Just as he was about to move on to a different task, he remembered that his recent promotion should have increased his maximum number of cords. Percy had originally been limited to half a cord per grade, per core, though the blessing of permanence had doubled that.

With two Yellow cores, he had been able to support a maximum of six clones, though three had been permanently occupied by Micky and Nephthys, leaving only the three that he had just created. Now that his soul core had reached Green, he should be able to produce a seventh cord: or a fourth clone.

His limit would keep increasing as he elevated his second core to Green and hopefully activated his third core. The bad news was that he would have to split his spatial seal into more than four pieces again, which didn't make for the neatest division. The good news was that a hundred and twenty-five cubic metres of storage space were still more than enough for most purposes.

After ensuring that none of his counterparts were idle, Percy shifted his attention to Ishkuria's gifts. Her token was something that he should probably just store in a dusty corner of his seal for the foreseeable future.

Intentionally approaching the titaness after Kassorith's defection came to light would be incredibly foolish, so Percy would rather avoid it unless he found himself in some kind of dire situation that could only be resolved with Ishkuria's assistance. Still, it was nice to have the option of reaching out to her. Percy wanted to pay the titaness back for her kindness one day, even though she had only helped him under false pretences.

Moving on to the least volatile of the wooden boxes that the goddess had given him, Percy counted how many first-generation teabags he had. His original plan had been to claim a set of five leaves from the tournament, give one to his host, have himself and Micky consume one each, and keep the remaining pair for a rainy day.

Now that Ishkuria had given him more than twenty, he could afford to be a little more generous. That didn't mean that he was planning to go around giving the teabags away, but he didn't want to be too stingy with his friends and family either.

'I think we should skip Elaine and Archibald for now,' he told Micky, getting a nod back.

As close as he was to his cousin and grandfather, Percy didn't see much of a reason to prioritize the Yellow-borns, nor was he planning to return to the Camelot province right now.

'I suppose that the two of us, Nephthys, Nesha, Orin, Freddy, and the Starry Queen can each drink one, which should leave us with sixteen doses. We'll hold on to those for any future familiars or the people we meet on our travels,' he decided.

His girlfriend and mentor were obvious choices, while the Violet wasp had already done a lot for Percy and shouldn't have much of her lifespan left. Considering that her presence was still required to keep

the hive under control, that she was one of Percy's greatest assets in the war against House Asclepius, and his most prolific source of royal jelly: for now, at least: this was also a no-brainer.

Freddy was the most controversial choice, since he and Percy weren't that close. The plump Honey Roll vendor had already received way more from Percy than he had ever asked for, and didn't seem to harbour any ambition of attaining divinity, so nobody would complain if Percy skipped him. However, Freddy was the only other Red-born on Remior that Percy knew somewhat well, so Percy had felt an odd sense of kinship with the guy ever since their early days in the Alchemists' Guild.

'Having access to Honey Rolls a few thousand years from now won't hurt,' Percy argued with a wry smile.

Micky scoffed. 'We've just invented a complicated inner shell that allows us to forcefully promote our cores: something that nobody has ever managed to do before. I think you can handle the Honey Roll recipe…'

'Screw that! It wouldn't be the same,' Percy replied, leaving no room for debate.

After sending his fellow aspect a pair of teabags for himself and Nesha, Percy and Micky spent a few minutes preparing and drinking a portion each, feeling the effect almost immediately.

The wave of vitality rippling through the Huehuan's crystalline body was far more pronounced, since he hadn't consumed a second-generation leaf before. The tea should have tripled his remaining lifespan, which was probably why it felt quite similar to an advancement.

Percy wasn't as lucky, the consumable only extending his lifespan by a relatively modest fifty percent. He wasn't going to complain about that, as he had received the rest on a previous occasion. Also, this was technically his second boost today.

While he still wasn't sure how long Micky was going to live, he should be able to calculate his own remaining lifespan. After taking his second core, the first-generation tea, his Gloomy Dawn, and his artificial advancements into account, he was confident that he had comfortably extended his life enough to reach the Clear grade with time to spare.

‘I guess I’ll take a moment to go through the math after dealing with the Void Decree as well,’ he thought.

Before he got to his main reward from the tournament, there were still a few other things that he had to take care of.

Percy carefully stored the second wooden box that Ishkuria had given him inside his seal, planning to deal with it when he had more time. He was honestly more excited about the opportunity to work on a calamity affinity than even some of the Decrees that he had claimed from the alliance, yet he understood that this would have to wait.

He wasn’t even done with the prerequisite affinities yet, and mastering the storm element was easily going to take several years, even with help from the Inimit deity’s learning aid and his familiar’s Divine Spark mutation. At the very least, Percy wasn’t going to touch that project before he was done with his artificial advancements.

Speaking of things that titans had given him, Percy also had the seeds and recipe for the sludge that could fully conceal a person’s mana core that he had purchased from Metatron. He wasn’t in a hurry to cultivate those plants, but he understood that having some of the substance at hand might become important soon: depending on how the Void Decree worked.

With many of the smaller things out of the way, there was only a spell upgrade and four Decrees to go over.

There wasn’t much to say about the Adaptive Arsenal. Percy was happy to have taken another step forward with magiscript. Getting more experience in applying his knowledge on the fly would serve him well in the future, but there wasn’t anything urgent that he needed to do about it.

Kerfyl’s Decree was a fun one. Initially, Percy had felt slightly conflicted over picking a utility Decree instead of something that he could have used to blast Machaon to smithereens. It was still entirely possible that his decision would come back to bite him in the ass later, but he didn’t regret it.

If not for the soul contract, he seriously doubted that he would have managed to strike a deal with Zurvanai, and the gains from that were infinitely more valuable than any active-type Decree.

This was without even mentioning all the doors that his contracts would open in the future. Much like Ludwick's Compass, Kerfyl's Decree was the sort of thing that would allow him to better leverage his most important asset: his bloodline.

On a different topic, Percy was quite excited about finally getting a chance to play around with the Penitent's Decree in his own body. It was the first prize he had claimed on Marador Prime, yet he hadn't found many opportunities to use it while possessing Kassorith.

Percy and Micky would have to replace their blood before they could do anything else with it. While that wouldn't take up too much time, any additional experimentation would have to wait until after their artificial advancements, but Percy wasn't going to complain about having another interesting project on the horizon.

And then there was the biggest reward of them all: the Void Decree. As soon as Percy's clones had returned to Remior, he had been able to tell that the Void Decree had followed him home.

He still had to perform a few tests before he fully understood the nature of his grand prize, but the mere thought of awakening his third mana core made Percy rub his hands in anticipation.

Chapter 684: Price

'Do you have it too?' Percy asked.

Like everyone had told him, he had acquired the Void Decree in an incomplete state, but it appeared to work a little differently from the Moirais' Decree. Instead of automatically absorbing every drop of life mana that came within Percy's reach, it had to be awakened manually.

Until it got fully repaired, the new Decree functioned like an active-type Decree that could be called upon at will, though it would hopefully not occupy one of Percy's three slots.

'It's there,' the Huehuan confirmed, much to Percy's elation. 'Do you think I'll get a new mana core as well?'

'Possibly, though there's always a chance that the Decree will be "spent" after one of us uses it,' Percy speculated.

It wouldn't be the end of the world if only one of them got it, but the mere possibility of effectively acquiring two rare affinities caused Percy's mouth to dry.

'What about the rest of you? Did you also get it?' he asked his familiar, the clone possessing her, as well as the other two.

'I haven't found a host yet, so I'm not sure,' one of them replied.

'Nope.' 'I don't feel any different.' 'I'm sorry, Percy,' the others said.

He nodded. Evidently, only he and his fellow aspect had obtained the Decree. This might change after they activated it, yet it currently looked like he wouldn't be able to pass it around like the Moirais' Decree, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Being able to give Elaine and the others a third core would have been nice, yet he didn't want to indiscriminately hand them out to everyone he possessed. The fact that he had given second cores to so many people was already going to bring him unwanted attention sooner or later.

If word of random people with two cores spread across the universe, the Moirai and the Void Hand might simply blame each other or think that another faction had followed in their footsteps. Learning that somebody had one-upped them, on the other hand, would undoubtedly create a lot more panic.

'Metatron will not be happy about this though,' Micky reminded him.

'Yeah. All the more reason to delay our next trip to the Vault,' Percy agreed.

The pentapus had invested a lot into Percy's participation in the tournament, and it didn't look like he would get much in return. Kassorith hadn't acquired the Void Decree, and it appeared that none of Metatron's past, present, or future test subjects would either.

That said, the titan had been aware of the risks, and it wasn't like Kassorith had returned from Maradion empty-handed. While Percy had admittedly prevented the Thess'kalan from picking rewards that he might have preferred, three Decrees and an extended lifespan was still quite the haul.

Unfortunately, Metatron might not see things that way: especially with Kassorith whispering Phoebe-knew what in his ears for the next few centuries.

If it wasn't for his friends in the artificial world, Percy might have considered cutting his losses and writing the Vault off. There were still things to be gained from Metatron, but not as many as there used to be. Percy could continue practicing magiscript on his own, and he could access high-level information and resources through the planets that he had recently marked.

The problem was that he couldn't allow Gabe, Leo, Tlaloc and the others to pay the price for his choices, so he would have to think hard about how to appease the irritated titan before his next visit.

'So me, you, and Zurvanai might become the only three-cored mages in the entire universe,' Micky recapped. 'I suppose that it's possible for Nephthys to join us if and when she becomes an aspect, but we won't know until it happens.'

'Indeed. Let's stop dilly-dallying and figure out how to activate this thing,' Percy said.

Sifting through the information that had entered his mind upon acquiring the Decree, he confirmed once again that it wasn't a coherent set of instructions: or, at least, hadn't been intentionally designed to be one. It felt more like a bunch of scattered realizations that had come from multiple people.

Percy guessed that the titans who had created the Void Decree hadn't known what to expect from their own creation. Their goal had been to imitate the Moirais' Decree, but the finer details had been completely outside of their control.

It wasn't until they had neared the end of their spellcasting that the specifics: including the price of the new mana core: had become apparent. Realizing that this information would be useful to the mortals who received the Decree, they had performed some last-minute adjustments to bundle their thoughts and insights into the acquisition process.

‘They don’t even use the same medium,’ Percy noted.

A few fragments took the form of written text, while others rang like softly-spoken whispers. A couple were closer to vague feelings that Percy struggled to make sense of.

Most of the information had at least been conveyed in a language-agnostic manner that Percy could understand despite not currently possessing a host who was a native of the Void Hand. Not wanting to risk missing anything important, he still pulled his translation device out of his spatial seal and stuck it to the side of his head before proceeding.

‘The Decree has to consume the mana cores of seventy-three living mages,’ Percy realized after trying to make sense of the rules for several minutes.

His face paled as the words sank in. After everything that Metatron, Lanthaniel, and Zurvanai had told him, he had honestly suspected that it would involve hurting somebody, but the exact number of sacrifices was horrifying.

‘Seventy-three people… just to make a single mage stronger…’ Micky echoed, sounding just as appalled.

Percy understood that this was an easy choice for a peak faction like the Void Hand to make. Nobody would care about a few dozen dead Red-borns or Orange-borns, if it meant empowering one of their most talented mortals. Even if the recipient of the new core ultimately failed to attain divinity, the weakest demigod in the universe was arguably more valuable than a million low-borns, let alone seventy-three.

The requirement left a bad taste in Percy’s mouth, but he knew that he couldn’t change it, so he kept studying the scattered instructions. After another ten minutes, he managed to decipher an additional morsel of information:

‘If you ensure that all the consumed mana cores have the same affinity, you can control what element you get.’

This… explained a lot of things.

Everyone obviously wanted a rare affinity, but finding seventy-three mortals with a specific element wasn't easy. If the Void Hand's factions were anything like Remior, less than one percent of the population was born with rare or composite affinities: and that included all such elements.

It wouldn't be impossible for the alliance to produce, say, seventy-three space affinity users, but what if they all had to be low-borns? What if they also had to be criminals, to justify the mass murder?

The Void Hand could still probably do that once or twice every now and then, but could they keep gathering such numbers on demand, for every rare affinity, whenever another batch of participants qualified for the Decree?

Even if they could, regularly purging so many rare affinity users would bring about many other negative consequences. The number of people inheriting those elements from their parents would decrease, hurting the population of rare affinity users over time.

It would also affect various areas of magical research that required test subjects with rare affinities. Finally, the odds of a mage being born with a combination of a powerful bloodline and a rare affinity: like Percy or Zurvanai: might be affected.

After taking all of this into consideration, Percy could see why most people would rather sacrifice a bunch of pure affinity users and upgrade their cores with rare affinity-changing treasures.

'I'm not thrilled about the idea of killing so many people for personal profit, even if they are criminals,' Micky said.

'Me neither.'

Percy considered what this requirement might mean for him and his fellow aspect.

Like everyone else, they definitely wanted rare affinities, yet they didn't have access to the treasures they would need to acquire them. Remior's population was much lower than the Void Hand's factions, so finding seventy-three people with the correct element wouldn't be easy: unless he went nuts and massacred his own relatives for a life affinity. Obviously, Percy wasn't going to do that, nor did he want to harm innocents. Finding that many criminals was also out of the question.

Acquiring pure affinities might be an acceptable compromise for now. While it would admittedly render the new cores useless for a while, Percy and Micky would be able to cleanse and promote them just fine, so they wouldn't lose any valuable time.

They could always try to get their hands on the necessary resources to upgrade them later. Sadly, they had missed the opportunity to grab a rare affinity-changing treasure from the tournament, but finding one in the future wouldn't be impossible: just very, very difficult. However, there was no need to resort to half-measures and uncertainties. Percy had a much simpler: if time-consuming: solution.

'I can create the sacrifices we need with my bloodline.'

He could possess lots of beasts, give them the Moirais' Decree, feed them a bunch of green mushrooms to repair their second cores, and finally pick out the ones that awakened whatever element he wanted.

Out of the half a million Starry Commanders and Breeders that he had possessed over a decade ago, he should have produced at least a couple dozen users of each rare affinity.

The exact number eluded him, because he hadn't bothered to count, and because his clones hadn't stayed inside the bodies of their hosts long enough to explore their new organs, but that wasn't a huge problem.

Passing the Decree to the Blue wasps had only taken a few months, so preparing the necessary numbers would just take a couple of years at worst. The hive contained several times as many Green bugs, which he had ignored in the past because the gains hadn't been worth the effort.

The Starry Queen wouldn't have any reason to decline his request, since most of the test subjects would survive, and even grow stronger from his experiments. Percy would essentially kill a little over a hundred Starry Knights in exchange for granting a second core to over a million.

The only issue was the enormous volume of green mushrooms that would have to be consumed. The Violet wasp would have to sacrifice a large fraction of her weakest descendants once more, but the hive had already recovered from the previous culling, and the long-term impact of this undertaking would still be positive.

‘Can we pick out the bugs’ second cores without consuming the first ones though?’ Micky asked.

Percy frowned. His friend had raised a good question. If the Decree devoured the creatures’ beast affinities as well… actually, he had no idea what would happen. Could a sapient acquire a beast affinity?

As far as he could tell, beast affinity-changing treasures didn’t exist.

It was possible that it was simply too difficult to obtain one, since affinity-changing treasures were harvested from the remains of dead gods, and Sixiang was the only faction in the universe known to have produced divine beasts. Obviously, killing one of them wasn’t easy.

That said, a few would have definitely died at some point, and the sapients who had slain them would have certainly tried feeding any affinity-changing treasures that they had produced to their mortals. The fact that Percy had never heard of such experiments probably meant either that the treasures wouldn’t coalesce, or that they wouldn’t work on sapients.

Judging by the lack of beast mages in the tournament, he felt that it was probably the latter, and that it also applied to the Void Decree. Percy and his companions hadn’t met that many people with two cores on Maradion, but it was strange that nobody had mentioned this possibility if it had been an option.

Sifting through the remaining fragments inside his mind, he eventually stumbled upon one that confirmed his guess, explicitly pointing out that beast cores would be completely ignored by the Decree.

‘Convenient. Hopefully that means that my idea is viable,’ Percy reasoned.

Micky and Nephthys didn’t need a duplicate beast affinity anyway. While Percy was admittedly a little curious to see what would happen to him if he acquired one as well, he’d rather not turn himself into a giant monstrosity without even changing the number of concepts he would be able to incorporate into his internal world.

Delaying the acquisition of his new core by another few years wasn’t ideal: especially after all the trouble that he and Micky had already gone through to get this far. However, he could stomach this if it

was the final hurdle that they had to overcome to become the first three-cored mages in the universe and obtain rare elements of their choosing without compromising their morals.

Before he could finalize his decision, Percy had to ensure that he completely understood how the Void Decree worked. Scrounging through the remaining pieces of information inside his mind, he discarded most of them after confirming that they were either duplicates of things he had already learned or a bunch of incoherent nonsense.

Just as he was about to declare his recent operation an overwhelming success, Percy stumbled upon a statement that made him pause in his tracks.

‘Surely this can’t be true…’

Not daring to believe what he was reading; he went over it several times and even asked Micky to fuse his mind with his and read it with him.

After being told that he hadn’t misread, and spending another hour going through all the remaining information with a fine-tooth comb in the hope that he had misunderstood something, Percy was forced to accept the grim truth:

He could never activate the Void Decree.

Its second price was one that he: of all people: could not afford to pay. Even the Yellow-borns and Green-borns of the alliance probably weren’t happy with it, but it wasn’t as much of a dealbreaker for them.

‘Awakening the new mana core consumes eighty percent of your remaining lifespan.’

Chapter 685: Calculations

‘Are you fucking kidding me?!’ Percy cursed. ‘Everything we went through to infiltrate the tournament, get the Decree, and successfully bring it back to Remior, only to stumble on the one thing that we hadn’t thought would be an issue?!’

Admittedly, he could see why the alliance's mages didn't think twice about activating their new cores. While a fivefold reduction in lifespan was a steep price for anyone to pay, it wasn't quite as bad as it sounded, because the organ would still make up for some of that after catching up to its owner's other core.

Even if it started a few grades lower, it would never take more than a couple of centuries of cleansing to catch up: unless it belonged to an Orange-born mage who hadn't managed to claim the Void Decree until Violet.

The passive boosts that multiple mana cores granted were additive, so someone going from a single core to a pair of them would double their lifespan. In this case, it would compensate its owner for some of the losses, resulting in an overall division of only two-and-a-half times.

It wasn't nothing, but the founding factions had access to first-generation leaves and cleansing resources on par with the Aurora Dew. Just one of those things was enough to make up for the Decree, and the other would still extend a Yellow-born's lifespan enough to place the Clear grade within reach, thus allowing the Void Hand's member-factions to retain their status as greater springs.

Percy couldn't help but wonder what would happen if somebody from a weaker world like Thess'kala made it to the top eight. Kassorith's people only had a second-generation sapling, and weren't privy to the secret of the cyan powder, so their Yellow-borns would be screwed if they acquired a new mana core.

This probably didn't happen very often: if at all: but the alliance would presumably either prohibit such contestants from claiming the Void Decree, or force them to swear an oath of secrecy from even their own people before they were given both the new mana core and superior cleansing resources. The second scenario sounded far more likely, as it would allow the alliance to avoid public outrage and make the most of a talented mortal.

Well… that certainly explained a lot of things.

Between the need to sacrifice seventy-three people to activate the Decree, and the lifespan reduction, it was no surprise it was considered a cheap imitation of the Moirais' Decree.

This also answered why Percy had been repeatedly told that the Moirai could turn their Orange-borns into gods, but hadn't heard that fact spoken nearly as much about the alliance. Both factions had first-generation leaves and the cyan powder, but the Moirais' Decree doubled their lifespans while the Void Hand's more than halved it.

Regardless of how the alliance dealt with the problem, Percy was completely stumped by this requirement.

Not only was he a Red-born who had overcome countless hardships to stretch his lifespan enough for potentially reaching the peak of the Colour realm, but he already had two cores. Obtaining a third would only increase his lifespan by fifty percent, which meant that the Decree would divide his remaining lifespan by a factor greater than three after all was said and done.

'Maybe we can still afford it?' Micky tentatively asked, sounding a little calmer than Percy. 'If I'm not mistaken, you've already overshot the lifespan requirement for the Clear grade by quite a bit. There is no doubt that this will be a major setback, but it might not be impossible to eat the price.'

Percy nodded, considering his friend's suggestion carefully. The last time he had calculated his lifespan, he had been about to acquire the second-generation leaf, and his artificial advancement had been little more than an ambitious idea.

Back then, he had estimated that claiming the leaf from Thess'kala and upgrading his boosting art would have brought him extremely close to his goal, and that a first-generation leaf would fully bridge the gap separating him from the Clear grade.

Percy had since achieved every one of those milestones, but that wasn't all that he had done. His previous calculations hadn't taken the royal jelly into account. Incorporating the miraculous resource into the Aurora Dew had further doubled his cleansing speed.

Inserting the new information into his calculations, he estimated that he should currently have a little over sixty-five hundred years left to live, before elevating his second core to Green or awakening the third.

Assuming that his remaining artificial advancements wouldn't take more than a couple of years to complete, and that the few decades that his third core would need to catch up to the other two were

negligible in the grand scheme of things, he roughly worked out how much lifespan he would have after certain major milestones.

After paying the price of the Void Decree and getting all three of his cores to Blue, he would have over eight thousand years left. Reaching Violet would take eight hundred and would leave him with over twenty-one thousand. Reaching White would take another eight thousand and would leave him with under forty thousand…

'Which is not even half what I'll need to become a demigod,' he concluded, his heart sinking as the cold, hard math dashed his hopes of acquiring the new core.

If he didn't activate the Void Decree, none of this was a problem. He could reach the Clear grade very comfortably, having nearly half a million years left to forge his internal world and attain divinity. This was several times the total lifespan of even Remior's Green-born demigods of old, which was proof that all of Percy's efforts in stacking so many bonuses had already solved his original problem.

Unfortunately, he couldn't have both a third mana core and a shot at godhood at the same time. Not with his current means, at least.

'You could always activate the core now and look for another way to extend your lifespan later,' Micky suggested.

Percy mentally shook his head. 'It's too big of a risk. I feel like we've exhausted most methods already.'

Even if getting a fourth mana core was biologically possible, Percy didn't expect another faction to produce a suitable Decree within his lifetime. He was already using a superior form of beast mana that most factions didn't seem to know about. The leaves wouldn't get any better unless he managed to revive the original World Tree: which would pit him against the Moirai, the Void Hand, the divine beasts, and a fourth powerful faction at the same time.

The only other approach to extending his lifespan that Percy was aware of and hadn't taken advantage of already was the mental-type Decree in the tournament's prize pool that he had skipped. Sadly, it would only stretch his time by a meagre ten percent. Even if his thrice-evolved Status greatly amplified the effect, Percy doubted it would be enough.

It was true that becoming a god required ambition and risk, but the line separating that from stupidity was a thin one, and Percy felt that he was close to crossing that threshold.

'If we have no choice but to toss our efforts in the garbage, I'd rather let the past year on Maradion go to waste. It's either that, or everything else that we have accomplished over the past thirty years,' he concluded.

Micky sighed. 'What about me? Should I activate it?'

Percy thought about it. His fellow aspect was a beast, so his first core advanced faster than the rest. Unfortunately, even if Micky's beast affinity reached the Clear grade in time, he would have to wait for his other cores to catch up, otherwise they wouldn't be able to incorporate their concepts into their internal world, which would defeat the point of having them in the first place.

The fact that the Huehuan's first core would hit its milestone a little sooner would mean that he would consume his remaining lifespan slightly more efficiently than a sapient, but Percy knew that mundane crows tended to live much shorter lives than Red humans, so his friend might still die before he did.

'Let's not,' he said after explaining his reasoning. 'I don't like this any more than you do, but it's for the best.'

It wasn't like they would discard the Void Decree: activating it would always be an option. There was still a chance that they would find another way to extend their lifespan, and it might not be too late to awaken their new cores then. Percy just wanted a guarantee that they were going to recoup their losses before taking that leap forward.

Also, Nephthys should be in a much better position than the two of them, since she was an Orange-born. If the reincarnated goddess gained access to the Decree after becoming an aspect, she might even be able to intentionally acquire her old mind affinity, which should make the Lone Wanderer's eventual apotheosis significantly smoother.

'You win some, you lose some,' Percy said. 'Getting the Void Decree was always a long shot. We should be glad that it wasn't a complete failure. Our artificial advancement is still cause for celebration, and that's without even mentioning all the other rewards we brought back.'

‘Agreed,’ Micky replied.

Having gone through most of their recent gains, there was only one final thing left to do, to conclude this bittersweet session. Percy tried to pull up his newly-evolved Status and was greeted by a couple of interesting notifications.

[Calibration complete.]

[Congratulations! Your mutation has evolved: Sage’s Eye -> Saint’s Eye!]

Confirming that Ningirima’s Decree had added new functions to his Status and senses improved Percy’s sour mood slightly, though it was the unfamiliar page that unfolded before his eyes that caused his jaw to slacken.

Chapter 686: Phoebe’s Decree

Every past upgrade of Phoebe’s Decree had brought about significant changes, allowing Percy’s Status to track new types of abilities or handle notifications in novel ways. He had expected nothing less from its latest evolution, though he had still underestimated the sheer extent of this overhaul.

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The Lone Wanderer

Aspects [2/4]:

[Percival][Mictlantecuhtli]Mana cores [4/6]:

[Mana core 1P: Green: Soul][Mana core 2P: Yellow: Pure][Mana core 1M: Green: Beast][Mana core 2M: Yellow: Ice]Domain:

[Dead Winter: Empowered]Bloodlines [1/2]:

[Clone]: Create a copy of yourself. Effect varies by affinity.Blessing [1/4]:

[Blessing of Permanence] – Enhance the durability of your soul.Mutations:

[Saint's Eye] – Draws from the cumulative knowledge listed in the Status to enhance one's senses, allowing them to discern details previously unseen.[Greater Thess'kalan Physique] – Greatly enhances one's physical strength and the toughness of their body. Greatly enhances one's resistance to high or low temperatures and sharpens their thermal sense. Greatly enhances one's resistance to toxins.[Ruby Bones]: Reinforces one's bones.[Dead Winter Elemental] – Uses ice mana to regenerate, shapeshift and sustain one's body. Allows every part of one's body to interact with souls.Spectral traits [4/4]:

[Weaving]: Boosts one's proclivity in manipulating one-dimensional structures.[Insomnia] – Eliminates the need for sleep.[Scribing]: Boosts one's proclivity in expressing meaning onto any written medium.[Mimicry]: Boosts one's awareness of their physical appearance, as well as their ability to maintain or modify it.Mindsets [<1%]:

[Ludwick's Compass]: Set mental checkpoints anywhere in the world. Instinctively track their location as you move away.[Shimmering Constellations] – Group your senses and memories into separate identities. This artificial segregation can be freely bypassed.Spells:

[Spectral Art: Parasitic Connection: Refined][Hybrid Art: Chameleon's Skin: Refined][Spectral Art: Cauldron of a Myriad Screams: Masterful][Spectral Art: Adaptive Arsenal: Masterful][Spectral Art: Cradle of the Savage Gods: Masterful][Wild Art: Sage's Pond: Masterful][Hybrid Art: Core Bestowal: Masterful][Ultimate Art: Symphony of a Dead Winter: Extreme]Alchemic principles:

[Extraction]: Separate and condense an ingredient's essence.[Pacification] – Delay an ingredient's activation rate.[Redirection] – Adjust an ingredient's effect.[Deattunement] – Prevent multiple conflicting ingredients from reacting with one another.[Bonding] – Enrich an ingredient with crystallized pure mana.[Restructuring]: Alter an ingredient's phase.[Scaling]: Brew a greater volume of ingredients at once.[Compression] – Elevate an ingredient to the next grade.[Consolidation]: Infuse multiple similar ingredients into a concoction while eliminating the redundant alchemic steps.Mental-type Decrees [4/5]:

[Phoebe's Decree: Reserved]: Grants access to your Status. If the mental-type limit is exceeded, an attempt will be made to consolidate existing and new Decrees such that they occupy fewer slots.

Additional functionality will be added in the future. This Decree cannot be discarded.[Ea's Decree: Ea's Gift] – Grants the Saint's Eye. This Decree can be discarded at will.[Obatala's Decree: Obatala's Approval]: Allows you to effortlessly hold and deploy your domain in its strongest state. This Decree can be discarded at will.[Ningirima's Decree: Ningirima's Mercy]: Grants resistance to demonic infestations. This Decree can be discarded at will.Active-type Decrees [2/3]:

[Metatron's Decree]: Open a one-way portal to the Vault of Magic at will. This Decree can be discarded at will.[Kerfyl's Decree]: Establish a spectral contract between two willing parties. Infringing upon its terms will result in the destruction of one's soul. This Decree can be discarded at will.Core-type Decrees [2/2]:

[Moirais' Decree] – Grants the seed of a second mana core to your aspects, familiars, clones, and hosts. Life and/or mind mana may be required to germinate the seed. The acquired affinity cannot be controlled.[Void Decree] – Can be activated to grant a third mana core to any of your aspects. Seventy-three mana cores and eighty percent of the corresponding aspect's remaining lifespan will be consumed. The acquired affinity will be restricted to the consumed elements.Bloodline-type Decrees:

[Iapetus' Decree] – Grants a bloodline.Free-type Decrees:

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

There was a lot to unpack, and Percy wasn't sure where to begin. Deciding to ignore the new sections for now, he focused on the way some of the old information was presented.

Most notably, his Status had added numbers in many section headings, in a clear attempt to quantify Percy's capacity in the corresponding categories. He would use the word "attempt" to describe what Phoebe's Decree had done, because he had no idea how absolute these limits were.

Did it say that he and Micky currently possessed "four out of six cores" because it was biologically impossible for them to acquire more than three each? Or was this simply the maximum number that their Status knew that they could obtain with their current means?

‘Judging from the fact that it says “one out of four blessings” even though we know we can get more than four cores, I’m guessing that the limits aren’t set in stone,’ Micky: who was also studying the new information alongside him: said.

Percy nodded to indicate his agreement. As far as he could tell, the listed caps merely suggested the next major barrier in each category that would make it difficult to keep growing.

Acquiring more aspects should give the Lone Wanderer more cores, and promoting Percy’s grade would raise the number of cords: and thus clones and aspects: that he could produce.

Of course, some limits seemed much harder than others: if not downright impossible: to overcome. For instance, Percy’s Status had created a brand-new core-type Decree category, seemingly for the express purpose of telling him that he had just hit some kind of upper cap. As for how solid that one was… he doubted that anyone in the universe would be able to tell him.

‘I guess that free-type Decrees are only classified as such until somebody discovers some limitation,’ he reasoned.

Perhaps, the first mental- and bloodline-type Decrees in existence had also been considered free-type Decrees, until more titans started casting and trying to stack them together. After making a mess of their mortals, they had probably realized the need to establish the corresponding categories and warn against acquiring more than what was safe.

Deciding to focus on his own situation rather than the conventions of the peak factions, Percy wasn’t sure that he ever wanted to fill up the aspect section completely. It appeared to be limited by his current number of cords, and the assumption that each new aspect would permanently consume two of them.

However, turning all of his cords into aspects would be ill-advised, as it would prevent him from roaming the cosmos or doing other interesting things with his clones. He figured that he would always want to keep a few slots free. The bloodline section was also likely destined to remain incomplete. The extra space was there to indicate that Micky didn’t have one. Sadly, Percy had never heard of a way for a person to acquire a bloodline after being born.

It was worth noting that the new information was much more meaningful than a mere stylistic preference.

Percy was elated to see that his Status had correctly quantified his current capacity for spectral traits, as this would help him a lot in the future. While he wasn't able to absorb another fiend just yet, he hoped that Phoebe's Decree would let him know whether or not his capacity increased the next time he acquired an aspect, saving him a trip to the Vault.

The same applied to his mindsets.

Percy was momentarily surprised that they were handled differently from everything else, though it made sense given what he knew about them. Rather than a fixed number of mindsets, each person had a limited mental capacity.

Each mindset would occupy a different fraction of that space, depending on what it did. Much like every expert had told him and Micky, their current mindsets were among the cheapest ones, barely consuming any of their capacity.

'All the more reason to get some useful mindsets soon,' the Huehuan reminded him.

'It's on our long to-do list as always,' Percy replied with a shrug. 'You know I can't promise more than that.'

It wasn't strange that the spell, domain, and alchemic principles sections were unlimited, though Percy hadn't expected his Status to give him a free pass to stack as many mutations onto his body as he wanted.

Granted, he had already confirmed that a creature could sustain upwards of eight distinct mutations without issue, but he had also learned that mutations could start merging once their effects overlapped, so he had thought that they would occupy some sort of limited, shared space.

Maybe the situation was simply too complicated for his Status to slap a number on it, though it didn't necessarily mean that no limit existed whatsoever.

The biggest change in the page was arguably the complete overhaul in the way it organized Percy's Decrees. Evidently, he had acquired enough of them and learned enough about them for his Status to start sorting them by type.

'There goes our plan to assimilate an infinite number of mental-type Decrees,' Micky pointed out with a spectral groan. 'What a bummer.'

'Not necessarily,' Percy corrected his friend. 'If you look closely, it says that it will try to fit more than five.'

He had no idea how likely his Status was to succeed in that situation, nor whether all the involved Decrees would survive the process intact, but he guessed that Phoebe's Decree would still upgrade itself even if it couldn't retain the auxiliary abilities.

Even if he were to discard Ea's Gift, Obatala's Approval, and Ningirima's Mercy right this instant, Percy didn't think that his Status would revert back to its original version. He would merely lose the ability to consolidate and expand his senses, lock his domain in its strongest state, or resist the corruption: none of which he would ever even consider ditching.

'Maybe if it consumes enough Decrees, its limit for auxiliary abilities will also go up, or it'll get better at merging them,' he speculated, albeit without any way of testing his hypothesis in the short-term.

On the topic of discarding things, Percy was shocked to learn that he could get rid of almost any of his mental- and active-type Decrees. This was something that had previously been exclusive to Kerfyl's.

'I suppose that my Status has taught itself how to extend that feature to the rest,' Percy reasoned with a grin, deciding to give Phoebe a huge bear hug the next time he caught her stalking him.

For a second, he wondered whether this was the mysterious feature that the titaness had promised him, though the entry in his Status made it clear that Phoebe's project was something else entirely, and that it was still ongoing. It had even gone as far as to reserve a slot for that purpose.

It was admittedly a bit cheeky of her Decree to make itself the only mental- or active- type that couldn't be removed, though Percy would be a fool to complain about that after all the additional slots it had granted him, as well as the flexibility in utilizing them.

Another thing that stood out was how his bloodline-type list didn't have a fixed capacity. The limit probably had more to do with how much risk a person was willing to stomach by stacking too many of these dangerous Decrees together than any innate restriction of the divine spells themselves.

Funnily enough, there was only one entry left in the free-type section after everything else got moved: the Penitent's Decree. Percy didn't expect that one to ever get its own list, mostly because he struggled to imagine what such a category would be called or what else might go inside it.

The upgraded Status had also confirmed that Nephthys would be able to use the Void Decree if she ever became an aspect: something that Percy was starting to look forward to.

'What do you think has changed about our mutation?' Micky asked. 'The description is identical.'

Percy smiled. 'Let's find out.'

Chapter 687: Saint's Eye

'I'm not sure what exactly it does,' Micky admitted.

Percy was testing the changes to his Sage's Pond in the settlement, while Micky was doing the same in Twilight City. When they focused their willpower on just one end of their shared existence, their range seemed to expand by another kilometre in every direction, bringing the total radius to three.

Percy wasn't sure how much of that he owed to the upgraded mutation, since he had just undergone several relevant changes. Once again, he couldn't help but appreciate how his Sage's Pond was quite possibly his single most scalable ability.

Each core promotion directly sharpened his senses, but also strengthened the domain that he shared with Micky, indirectly feeding more information into the Masterful spell. If that wasn't enough, it should also keep growing alongside their broader understanding of magic and with every additional entry in their Status, on top of any direct upgrades to Phoebe's Decree.

Given their recent gains, one might argue that a fifty percent boost in range wasn't all that impressive, but that would be a somewhat misleading conclusion. In terms of volume, the Lone Wanderer's secondary domain now encompassed over three times as much space, and he still had three more cores to promote in the near future.

If he ever decided to activate the Void Decree or acquire new aspects, the Wild Art would undergo several additional rounds of tempering. Once Percy and Micky were done filling their veins with spiritual blood, they would hopefully obtain yet another major way of expanding their territory. However, they had yet to understand what exactly had triggered the evolution of their mutation.

'It has to be the ability to detect corruption. I can't think of how else Ningirima's Mercy could have interacted with Ea's Gift,' Percy replied with a shrug.

It was the most reasonable assumption, as well as a possibility that they had considered before their return, though it appeared that they wouldn't get a chance to confirm it until the next time they came across a demonic infestation. Neither their environment, nor the people going about their daily lives within it appeared any different to Percy's senses.

'Pity we didn't have that on Robari. We could have saved so many lives…' the Huehuan said with a mental sigh. 'Do you think it's done the same to our domain?'

'Well… our willpower doesn't feel any different. Then again, neither does our vision,' Percy said. 'Let's empty and recharge the Zelesian beads as soon as we are done with the artificial advancements, just to be safe.'

They would have to do that anyway if they wanted to store a more powerful version of their domain within the transparent marbles, and it wouldn't hurt if this also happened to impart the artifacts with a mysterious quality that made them more effective against the infected.

Percy and Micky hadn't found an opportunity to use the objects ever since they bought them from Metatron: which was probably a good thing, because charging them was annoying. However, it was better to have them and not need them than need them and not have them.

With that settled, Percy felt that he had a much better grasp on his recent acquisitions.

Unfortunately, most of his upcoming projects would have to be placed on hold until he and Micky were done applying the Cradle to their other cores, though replacing their spiritual blood was one of the few things that could be done at the same time.

While Kassorith had complained about the pain involved with the constant destruction and regeneration of his soul, Percy didn't think it was a big deal: at least not compared to several other sources of soul pain that he had experienced in the past, such as acquiring his spectral traits or using his bloodline half a million times to give new cores to the Blue wasps.

He and Micky should be able to do this passively while forging the new seals in their remaining cores. They already had to keep their boosting arts perpetually active, so they would never run out of soul mana to mend their injuries, and fully replacing their blood would only take a few days.

Percy didn't think that they would get a chance to experiment with the new resource for another year or so, but even having the ability to recover faster might save their lives during their battle against Machaon.

'On that note, it might not be a bad idea to spend a couple of days upgrading our cauldron and brewing some Blue-grade tattoo ink,' Percy said.

In theory, Micky: who was now fully capable of performing alchemy: could have done that while Percy was working on his cores, but they would need to finish promoting Percy's pure affinity before they had a strong enough material to forge the tool with.

'You can work on that when I start my own advancement,' the Huehuan suggested. 'You'll be done by the time I need help.'

Percy nodded. The early parts of the Cradle were the easiest to use, so his fellow aspect should be able to handle them by himself. After covering more than half of the crystalline wall of his core with tiny seals, Micky would have to be more careful not to damage the existing constructs as he produced more, which was when they would have to cooperate.

Since Percy had just upgraded his first affinity, it might have been fairer to do one of his friend's next, but alchemy wasn't the only reason to prioritize himself. The Huehuan already had a core at Green, so they weren't in a rush to raise another.

They didn't want to push Micky's original affinity to Blue by itself either, since it might lack sufficient support. Due to his ability to freely shrink his body and efficiently convert ice to beast mana, he should have long left any stamina issues behind, but it never hurt to be careful. Most of his spells and mutations required ice mana to function properly, so merely having a larger and stronger body wouldn't help as much in a fight anyway.

Also, Percy's promotions allowed him to send out more clones, which was all the more reason to get them out of the way.

Thus, both of the Lone Wanderer's aspects returned to their rooms, concentrating on their training while paying some attention to the outside world: mostly to keep track of the political developments on Remior with help from Nesha and Orin.

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While Percy and Micky were holed up in their living quarters, the world hadn't stopped rotating. For the past decade, the noble Houses had remained relatively calm, with most of them focusing on developing their mages and their territories.

Most families had suffered heavy losses in the years prior to Percy's emergence, having fought several bitter wars against their rivals during the lead up to the blossoming of the Lotus of a Myriad Rivers.

Consequently, the nobles had been forced to stop killing each other and spend some time licking their wounds or consolidating their gains even before the overwhelming changes that House Avalon's most talented son had brought upon their world.

The news about the cyan powder and Machaon's treason had greatly shaken everybody: commoners and aristocrats alike. Several families had openly cozied up to House Avalon and the Alchemists' Guild, trying every trick under the sun to procure more Aurora Dew for their mages.

Every noble House had imported Percy's advanced metallurgy and construction techniques into their territories, while also commissioning House Etna to upgrade their enchantments through the use of the new magiscript knowledge that Percy had publicised, all in a bid to accelerate their development.

Whenever a family took advantage of Percy's teachings, they furthered his influence across the continent, giving Archibald an additional modicum of leverage over them. After all, it was impossible to collectively shove their heads in the sand and pretend that all of this otherworldly knowledge had popped out of thin air.

Consequently, most patriarchs were smart enough to read the writing on the wall: House Avalon was already well on its way to becoming Remior's eighth Great House: if it couldn't be considered as such already.

As for Percy himself… he had already become something even greater: a mythical existence that had changed their world more than any mortal before him, and who showed no signs of slowing down anytime soon.

Even so, the other Houses weren't in a rush to get involved in his war against House Asclepius. They didn't see the need to risk the lives of their own mages, nor the territory that they had worked so hard to conquer. Certainly not to stand against one of the already-established Great Houses, whether they secretly condemned Machaon's crimes or not.

Regardless of who was in the right or who would win in the end, a single mishap could bring disaster upon their families. Besides, if Percy was truly as powerful and talented as he appeared to be, they felt that he should be able to handle his own battles.

House Avalon had gathered just enough support to be able to stand tall against their enemies, on top of having grown quite powerful on their own. It was common knowledge that Percy was as strong as a Violet, and that many of his relatives: including Archibald: would probably be able to use a boosting art like Percy's own, to fight a full grade higher. However, that didn't mean that their family was ready to invade Machaon's lands or try to extract him from his territory without the home advantage.

The opposite was also true.

Most believed that House Asclepius was still the stronger side, but Machaon didn't yet have the numbers to completely ignore everyone else and invade, nor would the rest of Remior sit by and watch as Percy got killed while his life was still tied to the survival of the Starry Wasps.

This was why the disgraced patriarch had spent his time keeping his head low and trying to rid himself of his most pressing disadvantages. He had revealed a few months ago that the Starry Princess under his control was alive and well. With the secret out in the open, he was free to procure enough resources to feed the bug and keep her healthy.

Machaon had no intention of returning her to the Fungal Spire just yet, nor could the young insect establish a proper colony without access to the miraculous environment of her foremothers, yet she was no longer at risk of starving, and Percy's life wasn't as indispensable as it had once been.

In addition to alleviating the worries of the other Houses, Machaon was widely believed to be working on some kind of secret weapon of his own: something that would greatly improve both his personal power and that of the few allies that he had managed to gather, so that he could finally crush the opposition and put an end to this war.

Only Percy's most trusted friends and relatives knew that he was working on his artificial advancements, so nobody else was aware that he was just a few months away from having the power to strike first. However, given how rapidly Percy had grown prior to that point, everyone probably understood that he wasn't just sitting idly while his enemy was getting ready to kill him.

With very few Houses willing to officially pick a side, and with neither of the major players ready to make the first move, the continent remained in a state of faux peace as Percy and Machaon raced to complete their preparations in secret.

If an outsider visited the planet, they might fail to spot the undercurrents of tension brewing beneath the strained smiles and reluctant trades. The natives knew the truth. They braced themselves for the inevitable clash, hoping that they wouldn't get caught in it.

Chapter 688: Trouble in the Whistling Woods (1)

"Grandpa, our scouts have picked up movement near the western border of the province," Elaine said.

She had spoken calmly, yet she hadn't managed to fully hide the traces of fear in her voice. If it had just been a handful of powerful mages invading, they could have slaughtered House Avalon's sentries before they got the chance to report back to the family. The fact that they hadn't done that meant that it was a much larger army approaching, probably slowed down by their weakest members.

"It was only a matter of time." Archibald sighed. Nesha and Micky had already warned them that there had been signs of an impending attack, so they weren't unprepared. He turned to his son who had been in the office with him since before the interruption. Galahad was immaculately dressed as always, not letting something as trivial as a looming war affect how he presented himself. "Get our strongest mages ready and send word to our allies. We'll have to hold the line until reinforcements arrive."

The powerful acid mage rushed out of the room with a solemn nod, leaving Archibald alone with his granddaughter.

Archibald took a moment to regard Elaine carefully. This wasn't the best time for sentimentality, but he understood that depending on how today's events unfolded, he might never get another chance. Gone was the enthusiastic girl that had once filled the mansion with laughter and joy. The past few decades had forged her into one of the most reliable pillars of their House.

Her aquamarine hair had grown a little longer since her return from Twilight City, though Elaine hadn't allowed it to pass her shoulders again, to prevent it from getting in her way while fighting. Her features were still soft and gentle, yet the innocent lustre in her eyes had long faded away. She was still as beautiful and kind as she had always been, but she now exuded an aura of confidence and authority that had kept her would-be suitors at bay as she focused on her training.

Elaine hadn't slacked at all in recent years. Between her two Blue cores, the composite affinities that they both contained, and the countless hours that she had invested into her magic, Archibald felt that even Galahad might no longer be her equal. Archibald's son was only still considered the second-in-command of their family due to his centuries of experience and talent for leadership.

If there was an imperfection in Elaine's appearance, it was the ominous set of ruby-like teeth that revealed themselves every time she opened her mouth, as well as the same-coloured nails that could tear into a person's skin or leave scratches on the doors and furniture of the mansion with the slightest touch.

This was a problem that everyone in their family had had to deal with ever since they consumed the strange powder that Percy had sent them. Archibald's grandson had mentioned in his letters that he

could probably reverse the side-effects after possessing them and using his Mimicry trait, though he had been too busy to return home.

“Grandpa. I don’t care about myself, but I’m worried about my parents and brother,” Elaine said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Don’t be,” he replied. “Gawain will join the battle, but the others will be safe in the mansion.”

There was no point sending mages below Green in a war against a Great House. Even Greens were arguably too many grades removed from the Violet- and White-level combatants who would likely decide the outcome of the war, but House Avalon had ways to bolster their strength, and couldn’t afford to be too cautious before their reinforcements arrived.

“The mansion won’t be safe either if we lose,” Elaine protested. “I don’t think the gods will allow Machaon to wipe out our bloodline before we produce another Percy, but nobody in my immediate family has it.”

“Then, let’s make sure it doesn’t come to that,” Archibald said with grim determination.

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The sky was cloudy, though the sun revealed itself every now and then through the occasional gap in the clouds. A gentle breeze was blowing through the forest as always, yet the usually-cheerful melody of the whistling pines now sounded heavy with foreboding.

Had somebody told Archibald a couple of decades ago that he and his family would choose to stand against a Great House one day, he would have thought them crazy. And yet here he was, floating above the Whistling Woods, face-to-face with the man who had nearly doomed the whole planet and was currently targeting his grandson.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

“Lord Asclepius… Percy isn’t here. What are you hoping to accomplish by invading our lands?”

“I am aware of his absence.” The blond patriarch clicked his tongue as a gust of wind swayed his ponytail to the side. “My goal today is merely to weaken his allies.”

Any lingering hope of resolving the matter peacefully died with the White’s words. Archibald took one deep breath after another, pushing his boosting art to the next level.

He was already using Circulation with both cores, and he wasted no time adding the external component to the spell. The vibrant tattoos glowing across his body shone more brightly, a series of illusory vines and cyan ribbons extending out of his pores and coiling around his frame.

The vines weren’t real plants but mere constructs of life mana. Their magical leaves breathed the ambient mana around Archibald all the same, helping him convert it into his own affinities. His second core was still too weak to cast any usable spells, so he would only use it to boost the regeneration of the one in his sternum.

The Blues flying beside him activated the Dance as well, and so did the Greens hidden beneath the canopies of the whistling pines. Percy and Archibald had discussed at length how they were going to utilize their secret weapon in this war.

Everyone knew about the spell by now, though very few people had survived after seeing Percy and Micky use it. Back when they had been hunted across the continent by an army of greedy Blues, Percy had tried his best to eliminate any groups that he and his familiar had been able to handle, while running away from the rest.

Sadly, he hadn’t always been able to escape without showing his boosting art. Percy’s equipment had concealed some of the finer details, and deducing just the Refined version of the spell after catching mere glimpses of the much more complicated Carnival would have been a tall order.

Since then, Percy had begrudgingly given Archibald permission to spread the full Dance to their whole family. This wasn’t entirely without risk, and they hadn’t dared to share even Circulation with their allies yet, but they understood that they wouldn’t be able to stand against a Great House without making a few concessions.

Regardless of how this war ended, there was no doubt that the spell would end up leaking to the rest of the planet afterwards.

It didn't matter. The spell had served Percy well until now, but he had always intended to eventually share it with everyone. Given how powerful and influential he had become, there wouldn't be many who would try to get in his way after Machaon was out of the picture.

"Bold move," Lord Asclepius said with a faint smile. "Are you sure that revealing so many different versions of your spell to my entire family is a good idea?"

"I just have to make sure that you don't live long enough to learn it," Archibald replied.

Two tidal waves of willpower collided in the space separating the two armies with enough force to carve a smooth rift into the clouds above them, while sending a violent tremor through the forest. The poor Greens struggled to keep their footing, even though most were standing within the domains of their own superiors: who obviously had no intention of attacking them directly.

At the core of the clash were Machaon and Archibald, both wielding the full power of the White grade. Technically, Archibald was only a Violet, but his second core and boosting art more than made up the difference.

A similar dynamic applied to their subordinates. Machaon had brought five Violets with him, while Archibald merely had eleven Blues supporting him: and only because their numbers had swollen slightly in recent years thanks to the Aurora Dew.

His relatives held the advantage for the time being thanks to their own use of the spell, pushing the hostile willpower back and forcefully creating a more favourable battlefield for their side. Unfortunately, the situation on the ground didn't look as good.

House Asclepius had brought over forty Blues and a thousand Greens, compared to House Avalon's less than two hundred and fifty Greens. Even boosted by the Dance, there was no way the weaker family would last long against such a colossal army. The Blues of the Great House could have chosen to rampage through Archibald's forces, massacring them in mere minutes before reinforcing their leaders.

Thankfully, they instead decided to split into two groups and participate in both battles from the very start. Half joined their superiors, evening out the playing field, while the other half were clearly planning to protect their Greens from the empowered mages.

One might argue that this was worse for Archibald, since it would prevent him from taking out a few of Machaon's strongest assets early in the fight. It would prolong the battle while worsening the odds for his side. Still, estimating that the casualties of both families would be lower this way, he couldn't help but exhale in relief.

Archibald was the first to break the stalemate with an actual attack. Dozens of life clones leapt out from the forest, shooting towards Machaon like a rain of human-shaped arrows that looked identical to Archibald himself.

He had kept three hundred of them ready for this fight, and he had even created them while having his boosting art active. Consequently, each clone possessed physical might greater than a regular White's, further enhanced by a ruby skeleton and Archibald's spells.

Machaon shot them down with a barrage of plasma bolts, each clone uprooting several trees and digging a deep trench as it got slammed back into the forest. Thankfully, they were able to leap back to their feet without much difficulty, Archibald's life mana mending their relatively modest wounds in no time. If the enemy patriarch wanted to destroy them, he would have to invest a lot more mana into each attack.

As if on cue, the Blues and Violets joined the battle, plunging the Whistling Woods into chaos.

Chapter 689: Trouble in the Whistling Woods (2)

Archibald and Machaon's battle was one of pure strategy.

The powerful bloodline and rare affinity that had allowed the former to eradicate all of House Tantalus by himself sadly didn't scale very well into the higher grades. While each promotion tripled both the number of clones that he could sustain and the strength of their bodies: thus allowing him to essentially grow his power geometrically: his minions weren't nearly as mobile or easy to control as he would have liked.

He had spent centuries learning how to coordinate dozens of clones, but this was his first time directing several hundred. The constructs of flesh and magic were relatively quick on their feet, yet they couldn't fly, nor could Archibald lift more than a few into the air. He was considered a monster on the ground, though his overwhelming strength didn't do him much good when his opponent refused to approach, taunting him from above.

Granted, this wasn't a new problem for Archibald.

Blues and Violets were also capable of flight, which was why he had come up with various clever ways to leverage his abilities a long time ago. This was one of the reasons he had attacked House Tantalus in their own headquarters instead of luring them out into a more neutral battlefield. He had infected them with his disease before they had even left the confines of their home or had the chance to slip through his fingers.

For the same reason, he had to get a little creative to hold his own against Machaon.

His army of clones could do a lot of damage to the enemy Greens if left unchecked. Spreading them across the forest, Archibald tried to sway the outcomes of the smaller battles happening between his relatives and their opponents, tilting the scales of the war once more and forcing Lord Asclepius to intervene.

Countless purple projectiles rained down upon the mindless thralls, shattering their limbs and scorching their flesh. Unfortunately for Machaon, Archibald could heal his own body and, by extension, his clones much faster than he could heal other people at the same grade.

The enemy White could get around that by expending more mana, but that only introduced more complications. If he rushed, Machaon risked drying his core up and exposing himself to Archibald. Ignoring most of the clones to focus on a few wasn't an option either, because the rest would massacre his mages.

Lord Asclepius had no choice but to attack multiple clones at once, while using a slightly higher concentration of mana on the couple that he wanted to eliminate. It was slow, but it was the only way to make progress while holding Archibald's army at bay.

'He clearly knows how to fight against a life mage.' Archibald clicked his tongue.

Unlike the patriarch of House Tantalus, Machaon was extremely mindful of the diseases that the clones were carrying. Not only was he quite thorough whenever he destroyed one, but he had also manipulated the environment to protect his troops from the airborne sickness. He had methodically set fires across the forest, using his domain to bolster the hill-sized flames even further and incinerate the magical disease using scorching air mixed with smoke.

At the start of the battle, Machaon had tried going after Archibald directly, but flying too close to the ground had placed him within reach of the jumping clones. Lord Asclepius was much faster than Archibald, and so were his plasma spells, but it wasn't very difficult to dodge them when they were fired from hundreds of metres away.

Another thing Archibald did was consume some of his life mana to heal the lighter injuries of his relatives or mend their fatigue. Whether it was through the use of his bloodline or regular magic, he had taken a bottom-up approach in this war. He was trying to help his Greens and Blues win their own battles before they could help him.

Sadly, it wasn't working very well.

The situation on the ground was relatively stable for now, and Machaon didn't have a good way to end the war quickly, but Archibald's clones were dying at a consistent pace of about a handful per minute. In fact, the White could have probably slaughtered them even faster had he rushed, though he had opted to keep his core nearly full throughout the fight.

Creating even a single new clone from scratch took several hours, meaning that every destroyed minion marked a permanent loss for the purposes of this battle. Archibald's influence on the other fights shrank along with his army, and it wouldn't take more than half an hour for his opponent to decide that it was safe to descend closer to the ground.

Strangely enough, the dying clones weren't what Archibald was most worried about. He wholeheartedly believed that his Blues would deal a lot of damage to the enemy forces by the time his army was destroyed, and that their reinforcements were likely to arrive sooner. It was something else that was weighing heavily on his mind.

'Where is House Ypnos or the Divine Root? Weren't they working together? And where is the supposed secret weapon that Machaon has spent the past decade preparing?'

Archibald hadn't believed the disgraced patriarch's earlier words that he was merely trying to weaken Percy's allies. Judging by how careful the White's underlings were, the gods probably hadn't allowed them to deal too much damage to House Avalon.

'It's a trap. He's trying to bait Percy out of the Fungal Spire,' Archibald realized, his heart sinking.

It wasn't a secret that his grandson cared about their House. Machaon didn't know about Percy's artificial advancement, but he still probably understood that Percy was more powerful than the average Violet. Lord Asclepius had probably judged that his target was more likely to join the battle if it looked like a close one, which was why he was hiding his strength and trying to avoid scaring Percy off.

Understanding Machaon's motivations didn't change much. Archibald's family was still in a tough spot. Even though the Great House had probably been ordered to spare those with the Clone bloodline, nothing would prevent them from butchering everyone else. Archibald had no choice but to hope that his grandson had completed his preparations in time.

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Galahad had never regretted consuming the lotus petal and upgrading his lightning affinity to acid. The composite element was deadlier and more flexible, and a decade had been more than enough time for him to get used to his new affinities. The three colourful patterns glowing across his skin, along with the corresponding external flows were proof of that.

The acid pattern was rather similar to water, except for its purple colour and the fact that the wave-shaped lines on Galahad's skin and the corrosive bubbles entering and exiting his pores were shifted by a few millimetres from the azure ones. The two sets of tattoos and external flows intersected at the same spots where a network of indigo lightning bolts passed, a dense film of electricity crackling around Galahad's frame.

Despite his newfound proficiency with acid and water, there was no erasing his four centuries of experience with lightning, nor was it very realistic for him to expect his mastery of the new elements to catch up within a mere decade. That was why Galahad had spent a lot of time thinking about how to use acid and water to support his original fighting style.

The second-in-command of House Avalon was currently facing a Violet with a fire affinity. Despite his high grade, the poor mage clearly hadn't qualified for one of the three petals that the Great House had been given. He wasn't a match for Galahad by himself, but he was accompanied by a pair of Blues with earth affinities. One of them even possessed an annoying bloodline that allowed him to momentarily mess with Galahad's senses.

Outnumbered, outgraded, and outbloodlined, Galahad had been on the backfoot since the start of the battle. He was faster than his opponents, so he at least didn't have to worry about his safety, but he had yet to find a way of breaching their defences.

Half of the acidic blobs he had launched at them had missed entirely, while the rest had failed to eat through the walls of stone that the Blues kept erecting to protect themselves and their superior. The waves of vertigo rattling Galahad's brain every time he tried to attack certainly weren't helping.

Everyone could see that Machaon would eventually whittle down Archibald's clones, so his generals were more than happy to stall.

Galahad wasn't concerned, however. His boosting art had allowed him to keep his core and channels nearly full, despite his lavish expenditure. He hadn't wasted his time either.

'This should be about enough,' he thought, glancing at the acidic pools that he had slowly accumulated beneath him and his opponents.

There was at least a dozen of them, each body of liquid several metres wide and a couple deep. Galahad estimated that they contained over four times his total mana reserves, and that was after taking his boosting art into account. Stretching his domain to the ground, he allowed his willpower to envelop the corrosive liquid, tugging at something stored deep within it.

After countless experiments with his new affinities, Galahad had figured out how exactly the three elements were connected. Acid was essentially just charged water. The electricity split the liquid into two opposite: but equally corrosive: components.

These polarized components were mixed together, and they constantly wanted to violently recombine, though they were held apart by some property of the lightning mana that Galahad still didn't fully understand.

What he did understand, however, was that he could remove this property at will. Doing so would lower the barrier keeping the corrosive fluids apart, allowing them to recombine into water while releasing most of the energy that he had invested to separate them.

And that was exactly what he did.

Thick indigo bolts shot out from the acidic pools to light Galahad's body up like the midday sun. His skin blistered from the extreme heat as he struggled to control what was essentially enough mana to threaten even a White. He knew that he wouldn't be able to last longer than a few seconds in this state, so he had every intention of making them count.

Shifting his gaze back to his opponents, he locked onto the man with the irritating bloodline and his Violet superior. Galahad didn't care as much about the other Blue right now.

Over thirty crackling lances of condensed lightning formed by his side, each as large as the trunks of the trees that his acidic pools had melted. He launched them at his two targets, a dozen blasts at a time.

Thunderous shockwaves filled the entire forest as Galahad's extravagant spell momentarily caught the attention of every other Blue and Violet on the battlefield, though he didn't really mind the audience.

His opponents struggled to dodge the rapid projectiles, putting up whatever hasty barrier they could to block the rest. Panicking, the mage with the bloodline activated it once again to hinder Galahad's aim. It worked: to an extent: though only a fraction of the attacks had to connect.

The few lances that didn't miss melted through the walls of stone as if they were paper, incinerating the Blue and severely injuring the Violet. The latter could still fight, though his flesh was scorched black and one of his arms crumbled away, making him much less of a threat.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Wrath of Roaring Heavens: Masterful -> Wrath of Roaring Heavens and Corrosive Seas: Masterful!]

'A little on the nose, but I suppose it did the trick,' Galahad thought as he brushed away the notification.

The spell had left him in a rather pitiful state. His skin was covered in burns and hurt from head to toe as the smell of ozone still filled the air around him. His reserves had nearly dropped below the threshold of the Dance, and the pools on the ground had been reduced to puddles of regular water. Even so, there was no question that he had won this exchange.

Of course, his small victory didn't mean much in a war this messy. It simply made another pair of enemy Blues decide to stop harassing his relatives to gang up on him, bringing the total number of mages that he had to face back up to four.

With a heavy sigh, he flew aside to avoid an incoming meteor, taking one deep breath after another to prepare for round two.

Chapter 690: Trouble in the Whistling Woods (3)

The moment the fighting started, a group of two Violets and three Blues decided to gang up on Elaine. She had no idea whether they were targeting her due to how close she was known to be to Percy, or because she didn't have the Clone bloodline: thus making her safe to kill. Maybe they had simply realized how dangerous she would be if left unchecked, due to her two Blue cores boosted by five distinct versions of the Dance.

As flattered as she was by how highly her enemies had regarded her, or glad that she had lifted some pressure off of her relatives, keeping up with the powerful group of hostile mages was proving into quite a daunting challenge.

Pillars of steam wider than small houses, flocks of birds made entirely out of sand, and countless thankfully-smaller bolts of lightning and fire rained upon her, each threatening to burn her to a crisp or grind her into minced meat if she allowed it to connect cleanly.

To make matters worse, one of the Blues had both a mind affinity and an illusion-based bloodline, allowing him to mix countless fake projectiles in with the real ones while giving Elaine a nasty case of déjà vu.

"Am I some sort of magnet for annoying opponents?" she cursed through gritted teeth.

Having pushed most of her Refined spells into the Masterful tier over the past couple of years, she was fortunately just about durable and agile enough to survive the onslaught: for now at least.

A dozen corrosive tentacles made of a pungent purple liquid danced around Elaine. They batted aside or ate through most incoming projectiles, threatened any opponent foolish enough to enter her range, and even served as leverage for her to propel herself around the aerial battlefield.

Her Kraken's Waltz was the fusion of her old Jet Step and Kraken's Lair, woven along with her acid affinity into a technique that seamlessly combined offense and defence. Elaine had turned her deadliest weapons into tools for three-dimensional manoeuvrability, basing the spell on the same underlying principles as the elaborate footwork that her cousin had once taught her.

As a bonus, she had even made up for the limited reach of her constructs. The whips hadn't grown much longer, but that wasn't much of an issue when they could help her cross the distance separating her from her opponents in mere seconds. Of course, that wasn't easy to do while outnumbered as heavily as she currently was.

Occasionally, an enemy attack managed to slip through the corrosive whips to land on her agile form. That was when the second spell that she had upgraded through one of her composite affinities came to the rescue.

As early as when Elaine and Percy's clone had figured out the external flow of the water version of the Dance, they had noted how similar the bubbles entering and exiting her body were to her Bubble Coat spell. It had given her the idea of combining the two by adding a passive protective element to her boosting art. It was only after acquiring her mud affinity that she had found the time to work on that, while also incorporating yet another promising element into the technique.

The dense layer of gurgling sludge currently hugging her body bolstered her defences even further, completely negating the Blues' attacks. Elaine didn't look forward to removing the mud stains from her clothes after the battle, but she did look forward to being alive enough to worry about that thanks to her Bubbling Swamp Dress.

Despite the prized techniques that she had busted her ass developing, it didn't look like she was going to make it through this war entirely scot-free.

“Ugh,” she groaned as one of the steam pillars punched through both spells with enough force to slam her into the nearest tree.

The impact turned the trunk of the once-tall pine into fine splinters, while cracking Elaine’s shoulder. If it hadn’t been for her Ruby Bones, it would have done a lot worse.

More concerning than the mild injury was the loss of her accumulated acid. The attack had knocked her away from her tentacles, and two of her opponents were already working together to gather up the scattered liquid and move it away from Elaine before she had the chance to retrieve it.

‘There goes about a third of my first core’s reserves…’ she thought as she rolled away from an incoming fireball that incinerated what little was left of the tree.

With a mental sigh, Elaine took to the air once again, manifesting a new set of tentacles to resume the battle. Another exchange like this would cause her acid mana to drop below the threshold of the Dance, which would be catastrophic.

She would have to be extra careful until she recovered. Due to her increased mana regeneration, it wouldn’t take more than a few seconds, but the unpleasant feeling of vulnerability caused her features to twist into a grimace. This wouldn’t have happened if she had completed her ongoing project. At the rate that she’d been improving, it wouldn’t take more than a year, yet House Asclepius just had to have attacked before she was done fusing her spells.

Her idea was to combine her composite elements into a type of corrosive mud that she would use to fuel both the tentacles and her dress. That way, the flailing appendages would adhere to her barrier far more strongly, making it almost impossible for her opponents to rip them away.

It would also make the whips denser, allowing them to deal more damage, while giving her coat the ability to dissolve incoming attacks instead of merely blocking them.

Arguably the greatest benefit, however, would be how much more flexibly Elaine would be able to manage her resources. On the off chance that she still lost the tentacles after the upgrade; it would only cost her a sixth of her reserves from both cores rather than a third of just the one in her sternum. It should even give her the option of redirecting her mana, in case she needed to place a greater emphasis on offense, mobility, or defence.

The best part was that she had already confirmed the validity of her idea. Her early experiments had produced a fused affinity with the required properties, so it was just a question of scaling the process up and learning to fuel her spells with the new substance.

Based on her recent correspondence with Percy, she understood that the corrosive sludge that she had created wasn't a stable element, nor was it the complete fusion of her three common affinities. Something like that was known as a calamity affinity and would require comprehension of the final composite element that Elaine was currently missing: metal. She hadn't made much progress with it, which was why she was unable to use the sixth and final variant of her boosting art.

Metal was harder to access than acid or mud because Elaine's cores didn't produce it directly. If she wanted to use it, she would need to apply affinity fission to both of them before recombining lightning and earth. Leaving aside how troublesome creating metal mana was, it simply wasn't a very practical affinity for her to study or use when her reserves were as lopsided toward the water element as they were.

Luckily, the incomplete three-element combination that she was working on seemed like an acceptable compromise. It should be much easier for her to figure out, and she estimated that it would offer a rather comprehensive upgrade to her entire arsenal. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to be of much help in this battle, nor did she think she would be able to take down all five of her current opponents.

'It doesn't matter. Just keeping so many of them occupied is a huge contribution to our family,' she consoled herself.

House Asclepius had only brought five Violets and forty Blues to the Whistling Woods. Galahad had already injured a Violet, killed a Blue, and was keeping another three busy. Since a Violet was approximately worth as much as five Blues, Elaine and her uncle had basically removed about a third of the enemy family's top-level combat force from the battle: excluding their patriarch of course.

House Avalon's remaining nine Blues were doing a surprisingly decent job keeping up with the rest, to the point that many of the mages who had initially tried to harass her family's Greens had been forced to reconsider. The damage that Archibald's clones had done to the opposing Greens couldn't be overstated either. While the flesh constructs were dying rapidly to Machaon's spells, it wouldn't be long before some of her relatives on the ground were free to support their superiors, allowing the Blues to assist her grandfather.

Elaine's analysis did much to improve her foul mood, since she understood that the vast positive impact she had caused on the broader battle was more important than her personal frustration. That said, she wasn't planning to take a beating without fighting back.

Her gaze swept over her opponents once more, the corners of her lips curling up as she locked onto a certain Blue with a mind affinity.

'I might not be able to beat everyone, but I'll make sure you don't live long enough to bother anyone else.'