## Wanderer 691

Chapter 691: Trouble in the Whistling Woods (4)

Gawain and a dozen of his relatives were fighting against a large group of over forty hostile Greens.

House Asclepius' mages outnumbered House Avalon's at a rate of four to one, though there were more than just mages in the forest. Gawain's family had sent over a hundred life users to the battle, each commanding around thirty clones.

The thousands of mindless minions fighting within the devastated woods weren't individually impressive like Archibald's. Even with their reinforced skeletons and boosted physiques, at least a handful were typically needed to put any pressure on an enemy mage.

The good news was that Machaon's Greens didn't have the option of escaping to the sky whenever they got swarmed, in some ways making House Avalon's famous bloodline more dangerous at the lower grades. Gawain sadly didn't possess it, but half of his current teammates did, jointly directing a battalion of nearly two hundred clones.

The two sides appeared fairly balanced at first: which Gawain was extremely thankful for. While their current ratios were quite representative of the overall sizes of the two armies, he understood how easily a person could end up singled out and eliminated in a messy fight like this. Unfortunately, his luck finally ran out when one of the enemy lieutenants decided to fly his way.

"Incoming Blue!" Gawain yelled to alert any of his allies that might have missed the newcomer.

The whizzing spells, crackling flames and booming explosions nearly drowned out his voice, though Gawain didn't need to repeat his warning, since the powerful fire mage revealed his presence by unfolding his domain.

The Blue's willpower didn't feel too suffocating to a Green empowered by the Dance: especially when spread thin to affect so many people. Physically and magically, House Avalon's mages were no weaker than true Blues, though the Masterful spell wasn't quite enough for them to manifest proper domains of their own.

At most, Gawain and his allies could unleash weaker, short-lived bursts of willpower that certainly helped when timed properly, yet couldn't bridge the vast gulf separating the two grades. They could still resist the enemy domain fairly well, but it slowed them down just enough to tip the scales of the battle.

Gawain's acidic whips shrank as the liquid comprising them evaporated rapidly, causing him to nearly drop the tree trunk that he was about to hurl toward an unsuspecting opponent. Pouring more mana into the constructs, he managed to grip the piece of burning wood just long enough to shoot, though the delay gave the enemy Green a chance to sidestep it.

Estimating that he could only fire three more attacks before having to pause and recharge, Gawain clicked his tongue. 'Did it have to be a Blue with a fire affinity?'

The hellish inferno raging through the forest already made it harder for Gawain to absorb or circulate water mana. It didn't affect his lightning affinity in any way, but Gawain had only adapted his old spells to be fuelled with acid instead of water. He hadn't quite managed to develop any lightning spells after receiving the affinity-changing treasure from Percy. The last thing he needed was another domain that exacerbated the flames: as if Machaon's hadn't been problematic enough.

Thankfully, Gawain wasn't in too much danger, since his role in this battle was a somewhat supportive one. He excelled at launching large projectiles from afar to cover his teammates. He could handle himself at close range if necessary, but he didn't have to do that with so many clones standing between him and his opponents. The brainless thralls would just have to hold on without as much support for a few seconds.

The situation wasn't ideal, yet there wasn't much he could do to change it.

Gawain was quite fortunate that half of the enemy Blues who had initially descended to the ground had been forced to return to the sky to assist their superiors. Between Archibald's minions attacking the weaker mages, and the unexpected success of his eleven generals in the aerial battlefield, their family was holding on relatively well against the Great House.

Galahad's small victory wasn't too shocking, as Gawain's older half-brother had always been an overachiever. Galahad's fame had previously been limited to just the Camelot province and their immediate neighbours, but the fellow acid mage had made enough of a splash in this battle that people would likely sing about him all across Remior in the years to come.

It was Elaine's exploits that filled Gawain with fatherly pride, however. In just a couple of short decades, his little girl had grown into one of their family's most powerful fighters, second only to his father.

'Well… third,' he corrected himself upon remembering the other little monster.

It felt like only yesterday when he had escorted the two teens to Phoebe's temple. The harebrained girl that had slept through her watch and nearly gotten all of them killed had now grown into a figure that House Avalon could rely on. Meanwhile, the Red-born boy who had struggled to hold his own against a single wood goblin was the same person who had caused this entire war and shaken the whole continent up.

Gawain's memories of that year grew bitter as he watched the nostalgic forest burn to ashes all around him. Their family wouldn't be exporting much whistling sap after the war, but they had bigger things to worry about than the loss of their province's prized dessert.

Estimating that he had accumulated enough mana to resume fighting, Gawain coiled his whips around another broken tree, the wood sizzling under the corrosive touch of his mana as he prepared to shoot it toward the Blue. Their group was clearly on the losing side, but Gawain and his allies didn't need to win: they just had to survive long enough for other battles to conclude in their family's favour.

"Be careful up there, Elaine," he whispered, clenching his fists. "Whatever happens, let's not leave Owain without a father or sister today."

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Owain paused as he neared the border of the Whistling Woods, the sight of the hellish landscape making the blood freeze in his veins. Plumes of smoke mixed with the clouds to blacken the sky, painting a stark contrast against the backdrop of orange illuminating the area.

He couldn't see the Greens fighting on the ground, but he couldn't avert his gaze from the powerful mages hovering above the trees even if he wanted to. They crossed vast distances like meteors of flesh and mana, shooting giant spells at one another.

Most missed, exploding somewhere in the forest and possibly slaughtering entire groups of unlucky mages. A couple of attacks occasionally collided, creating flashes bright enough to sting Owain's eyes, followed by thunderous shockwaves that reached his ears and made the pebbles by his feet jump up and down a few seconds later.

He had never seen so many Blues and Violets gathered in a single place: let alone fighting at full power. Scanning the combatants carefully, Owain spotted his sister surrounded by five enemies, the unmistakable shapes of her flailing tentacles cutting through the chaos.

Gritting his teeth, he mustered the courage to enter the forest.

Elaine and their father would kill him if they saw him here. Owain's core was only at Yellow, and he didn't even know the complete Dance because nobody in their family had been able to teach him the external flow for his affinity. Even figuring out the correct pattern for Circulation by himself had been a challenge.

Still, with a rare affinity and boosted by the Refined spell, Owain wasn't much weaker than a regular Green. Less experienced? Sure. But what kind of man would he be if he cowered at home while his sister bled and died for him?

Carefully navigating around the areas where the wildfire burned fiercest or where he spotted Blues fighting, Owain searched for an opponent he could handle or a small battle that he could contribute in without getting killed.

No matter how cautious he was, he knew that he wouldn't be perfectly safe. Hell, if he was fated to die here, one of the Violets' stray spells might drop on his head at any moment, not leaving even his bones behind.

'But that's true of anyone, not just me. It's no excuse to hide,' he kept telling himself whenever he felt like heading back.

A few minutes later, he stumbled upon the first corpse. Having never seen one before, he was rattled, though he had come here expecting nothing less. Scrutinizing the bloodied remains, he recognized the face of one of his distant aunts, but he didn't panic.

Owain had seen enough life clones to easily tell them apart from real people: even with their clothes and flesh burnt together into a crisp, and their bisected torsos face down in the mud.

'It's not Aunt Grelia,' he reiterated, yet he struggled to keep his legs from shaking. 'It's basically a broken doll… and its guts are like stuffing.'

Falling to his knees with a muted thud, he barely managed to keep his breakfast in. Forcing himself to get up, he advanced through the woods, hoping to find fewer mangled relatives and more live ones in need of being rescued.

He wasn't so lucky, though most of the corpses belonged to clones or enemies. He told himself that the rest were clones too, even though he knew that they weren't. Many of the dead didn't even possess the bloodline, but he could process his feelings later, when his family's future was no longer on the line.

Once the shouts and explosions grew louder, Owain took a deep breath after the other, partly to calm himself down and partly to activate his most important spell. One might argue that he should have done that before entering the forest, but keeping Circulation running for more than forty minutes wasn't easy, so Owain hadn't wanted to waste it.

Faint, nearly imperceptible tattoos formed on his skin, drawing dozens of intersecting loops. His mana was transparent, so it would be difficult for an external observer to see how it was flowing within his channels without using Mana Sense.

Owain knew that the pattern for his affinity was far more bizarre than others. He had figuratively banged his head against the wall for years before realizing that he was supposed to manually reverse the direction of the flow every few seconds. If he didn't, his mana would keep accelerating until he lost control of it entirely.

Ignoring the nuances of his spell, Owain focused his senses outwards, looking for a mana signature. He found a handful. Approaching carefully, he identified: to his great joy: a rather manageable group of six Greens. He guessed that only one of them was an ally, as their mana was far more potent and abundant than the five mages they were fighting against.

Fear and excitement surged through Owain's chest in equal parts.

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Owain was definitely close enough for his enemies to notice him as well, so he hoped that they were too deeply engrossed in their fights to do so. Not wanting to worsen his odds by delaying, he charged towards the nearest opponent.

Time mana spilled out of his pores, enveloping his body and accelerating his every movement. He was consuming his resources much faster than what most Yellows could sustain, but he didn't care. His affinity already allowed him to regenerate his mana more rapidly than others at his grade, and his boosting art only sped the process up even further.

His surroundings blurred as he struggled to avoid the trees in his path. Crossing half of the distance to his target in an instant, he raised his right fist, preparing yet another spell. Owain could currently only cast three: Circulation, Temporal Dash, and Heartbreak. Seeing as the last two were merely Crude ones, he knew that he had to make every part of his embarrassingly narrow arsenal count.

The Green standing before him was a woman with a water affinity like Elaine. Having never seriously harmed a person before, Owain hated the idea of starting with somebody who resembled his sister, however vaguely, though this wasn't the time to hesitate. At least, he couldn't make her blurry features out completely, which helped him steel his will. As did the knowledge that she had come here to murder him and his loved ones.

The enemy mage spotted him, hastily launching a barrage of pressurized water arrows. Thankfully, there was only so much that she could do at a moment's notice, her mana and attention split between Owain and her other opponent.

Taking advantage of his accelerated reflexes, Owain sidestepped most of the projectiles. One still pierced his left shoulder cleanly, leaving a hole wide enough for his finger to pass through. This was his first time being injured this badly, causing his heart to leap to his throat.

The good news was that the attack hadn't damaged any vital organs, and even the pain had yet to register. Knowing that he only had seconds before his brain caught up, he hastened his steps further, closing the rest of the distance to his now-toothless opponent.

Planting his right fist in the woman's sternum, Owain felt both his own knuckle and the water user's ribs crack. She had a grade on him, but she lacked his mutation or boosting art, and he had struck with way too much force for either of them to just brush it off.

The damage wasn't too serious, at least until he poured nearly a third of his mana into her body, focusing on what he hoped where her largest veins and arteries. Having practiced the technique extensively on one of his grandfather's clones, Owain was familiar with the structure of the human body and fairly confident in his aim, though he had never used the spell on a different person or under so much pressure.

By accelerating the blood entering the woman's heart while decelerating the flow leaving it, the only offensive spell in Owain's Status was supposed to cause the organ to explode. The sickening squelching sound and the mouthful of blood escaping the poor woman's lips were proof that it had done its job.

By the time he heard the viscous liquid splash on the dirt, he had already retreated behind the nearest tree. Multiple spells of various colours rained down on the trunk, crushing it into splinters. Owain kept running without looking back, not wanting to get caught by multiple angry Greens.

His work here was done. It would be up to the ally that he had hopefully just assisted to capitalize on their advantage and finish their weakened opponents off.

About fifteen seconds later, the pain in Owain's shoulder and fist finally hit, causing him to wince. Even so, he didn't dare to stop moving until he was sure that nobody had followed him.

Grabbing the black cube strung around his neck, he activated the enchantment on one of its faces. He couldn't lift his left hand or unclench his right, so he had to hold the expanding spatial amulet that Elaine had gifted him with his elbows and thighs while leaning on a tree.

Clumsily extracting a couple of potions that his cousin had brewed and sent from the Alchemists' Guild; Owain uncorked the vials with his teeth and gulped down their contents. The thick, minty flavour of the liquid wasn't the worst thing in the world, though he was most interested in the refreshing feeling that spread out of his stomach and towards his injuries the very next moment.

'Wow. Green healing potions aren't a joke,' he noted as soon as the effect died down.

His wounds hadn't healed entirely, yet the pain had greatly dulled. He was tempted to drink another dose or three, but he figured that he should save them in case he suffered a more serious injury later. At

least, the hole in his shoulder had stopped bleeding and he had regained some control of both limbs, though it probably wouldn't be a good idea to repeat his earlier stunt anytime this month.

Well… tough. Owain had every intention of risking his butt a couple more times today. He was still an able-bodied combatant by anyone's definition, and he knew that his cousins and uncles were currently suffering much worse out there.

Despite the minor hiccups, Owain had confirmed that his previous approach was viable, so he resumed his search for suitable battles to join. Staying as far away from the Blues and Violets as he reasonably could, he ignored the corpses and destroyed flora in his path while looking for anything alive.

Over the next twenty minutes or so, Owain managed to intervene in a couple of additional fights, though only the first of the new ambushes was successful. The second time, he made the mistake of targeting a burly earth mage who blocked the assassination attempt with a hastily erected wall of stone. Worse still, the impact finally shattered Owain's right fist completely.

Luckily, he was able to flee from the pissed off Green and his companions before they could do anything to him. If the gods willed it, Owain might have even distracted them long enough for their opponent to gain the upper hand, though there was no way to tell.

'I need to come up with an offensive spell that doesn't require physical contact,' he thought with a grimace as he drank the last of his potions.

A project for another day.

As far as today's battle was concerned, Owain knew that he had reached his limits. His hand was a complete mess, despite the potent remedy that he had consumed. He would have to ask his grandfather to fix him after the war: assuming that Archibald didn't kill him himself for disobeying his orders. Even if he didn't, Owain would probably need a second round of healing after Elaine was done with him.

Leaving his injuries aside, he wouldn't be able to keep Circulation running for much longer, and even the environment clearly didn't want him here. The wildfire had spread dangerously close to his location, the heat causing his skin to blister as the acrid smoke stung the back of his throat and made his eyes water.

The Greens fighting deeper inside the hellish battlefield could probably keep the flames at bay and endure the toxic fumes for a while, but even the outskirts of the forest were no longer safe for a Yellow.

Sighing, he headed where he thought the mansion was. Disoriented by this new, burning version of the once-familiar forest, he wasn't sure that he had guessed correctly, yet he should be fine as long as he moved away from the fire and the giant explosions.

All things considered, Owain hadn't accomplished much, but he would at least be able to sleep better with the knowledge that he had done his best. He might have even saved a relative or two, though he wouldn't find out until later.

Just as he was about to deactivate his boosting art, he heard a girl screaming for help.

Given his poor condition and the desperation evident in the agonized cry, Owain doubted that he would be able to provide timely assistance. Still, he couldn't find it in his heart to ignore her: especially because he recognized the voice of his cousin, Yeelia. She was a Yellow-born only a couple of years older, and they used to play together as kids. Their mothers were quite close, so Owain wouldn't be able to look his aunt in the eye if he left her daughter here to die. Gritting his teeth, he rushed toward the source of the scream against his better judgement.

Arriving at a small clearing, he was instantly assaulted by the stench of blood, thick enough to drown out the omnipresent scent of burning wood. Stumbling upon the most horrific scene that he had ever witnessed, he wasn't able to keep himself from heaving out his most recent meal this time. Countless severed body parts were scattered within a muddy pool, most of them impaled by or lying next to various metallic weapons: spears, swords, scimitars and lances. Every single object appeared to have been forged out of the same metal mana, glowing in a bright Blue colour in Owain's Mana Sense.

"Shit," he spat.

Owain would readily admit that he had been quite daring and, sure, even a little reckless today, but he wasn't suicidal. He was under no delusion that he would be able to do anything to a Blue: ambush or not. Scanning his surroundings carefully, he tried to figure out which way the murderer had gone, only to avoid meeting them by accident.

"Looking for something?" an icy voice asked, startling Owain who hadn't realized that he had company.

A lone figure sat atop a branch near the top of the pine tree opposite him, with tens of additional metallic weapons floating by his side. He was a lanky man with a crooked nose and long, greasy dark hair. Owain had only missed the human-shaped monster because he wasn't used to keeping an eye out for enemies from above.

Unable to stop himself from trembling in his boots, Owain suddenly regretted coming to this place. It was honestly an irrational thought, since he had been cautious enough and held his own just fine against the Greens. Even one of his family's Greens would have been screwed facing a Blue alone, yet so many had bravely risked their lives in similar situations.

Still, he didn't want to die, and there was nobody around to save him.

"Hmm? Just a Yellow runt? House Avalon must be desperate, sending a kid to such a nasty battle," the Blue said, tilting his head in confusion. Owain felt a pang of hope that the man would spare him, though it evaporated once the metal mage added, "not my problem. You clearly don't have the life affinity, so there's no need to leave you alive."

A suffocating pressure descended upon Owain, slamming him into the damp ground and pressing his left cheek against dirt still soaked with his relatives' blood. Half an hour earlier, he might have had enough strength to try and flee, but his sore muscles and overdrawn boosting art chose the worst possible moment to betray him.

His accumulated mana spilled out of his pores, a wave of weakness sealing his fate. The most he could do was lift his gaze slightly, just to see the Blue holding his palm up, with over half of the weapons pointing straight at him. Closing his eyes, Owain felt a couple of bitter tears roll down his face to mix with the mud.

'I'm so sorry Dad. Mom. Elaine. Grandpa. I should have listened to you all and stayed at home.'

He held his breath, waiting for his inevitable end, though the moment stretched for a couple of seconds too many. Why was the Blue hesitating? Had he suddenly grown a conscience? Wasn't he in a rush to wrap this situation up and move on to the next battle?

Shifting slightly, Owain realized that the willpower locking him in place had vanished at some point. His eyes jolted wide open just in time to see the metallic weapons hit the ground. Some stabbed straight into the dirt, lodging themselves deeply, while others didn't strike at the right angle, bouncing clumsily on their hilts, handles, or flat of their blades.

The cacophony of clanging steel rattled Owain to the bone, but not as much as the Blue's expression. He was still sitting in the same spot, his features calm, though his pupils were now dull. That only lasted for a moment before he slid down from the branch, plummeting right behind his constructs and hitting the ground face-first with a sickening crunch.

Owain felt a chill rush down his spine. The powerful mage who had slaughtered several Greens as if they had been chicken had died in an instant, without even realizing how!

There still wasn't anyone nearby, nor had there been any injuries on the enemy's body: at least not before his graceless landing. The only thing out of place was a strange weapon lodged into the tree right next to where the Blue had been a second ago.

Owain gasped.

'That scythe… wasn't there before.'

Chapter 693: Emotion

Initially, Owain thought that he was mistaken.

Perhaps the scythe had been created by the dead Blue along with the other weapons and he had just missed it earlier. It wouldn't be the only construct shaped like that, though the dull grey colour of both its crescent blade and cylindrical shaft didn't look anything like the silver gleam of the swords and axes that had slaughtered his relatives.

Unlike the blood-soaked tools that surrounded him, the scythe didn't even register in his Mana Sense, making it appear more like a mundane weapon that some low-born traveller had forgotten in the woods a very long time ago. Still, its location would have been way too coincidental, and Owain was certain that it hadn't been there during his brief chat with his would-be murderer.

As if to settle his doubts once and for all, the mysterious weapon suddenly moved.

It didn't dislodge itself with the sound or effort that would typically accompany such an action, but merely phased out of its wooden prison, its colour fading as it spun away and disappeared into the dark sky.

Owain was too exhausted and in too much pain to keep fighting, though he couldn't contain his curiosity entirely. Summoning the last of his strength from Phoebe-knew where, he climbed up the nearest tree, nearly falling on his butt a couple of times in the process.

His Yellow core gave him nine times the strength of a Red even without a boosting art, making it relatively easy to carry his body up the trunk despite his fatigue, though the fact that he could only use one of his hands without crying out in pain delayed him somewhat.

Cautiously sticking his head out of the lush canopy of a tall pine that the encroaching flames had yet to defile, Owain made sure to scan his surroundings in all three dimensions this time.

The Blues, Violets, and even the two patriarchs had stopped fighting, everyone gazing upwards just like him. He had no idea whether anyone had seen what had happened to the man with the crooked nose, but they had all clearly sensed that something was off.

Even the fights on the ground seemed to have slowed down, the deafening cacophony of the war having shifted. There were fewer explosions or loud impacts, though there was no erasing the crackling of the spreading inferno, nor the agonized shrieks of the wounded.

A spiralling pillar of smoke shot down from the churning sea of clouds, right before a powerful pair of wings flapped with enough strength to scatter it and reveal their owner. It was the largest bird that Owain had ever laid eyes upon: some kind of grey crow with wings wide enough to comfortably hug a small house!

'A Blue beast…?' he estimated with uncertainty, though he couldn't sense a drop of mana inside the giant monster's frame.

Of course, his confusion didn't last long. Owain wasn't privy to the strategic discussions between the grownups in his House, but he hadn't lived under a rock. Every teenager on Remior knew enough to put two and two together: let alone one as deeply connected to the newcomer as Owain was. This was none other than the person he looked up to the most in the world.

Sure enough, it wasn't difficult to spot the cloaked figure standing atop the bird's head, his boots hidden beneath the plumage of his avian mount. The man seemed wholly unbothered by the crushing air pressure that would have certainly ripped even a Green apart, the frigid gales merely causing the ends of his immaculate grey robes and neatly tied black hair to flutter wildly behind him.

Owain's cousin sported a calm but solemn expression as he scanned the ravaged forest, an emotion flickering within his unassuming grey eyes that Owain couldn't quite put his finger on from so far away. Lifting his hand, the newcomer casually caught an object that appeared from seemingly nowhere, resting it over his shoulder with the tip pointing up.

It was the same scythe that had just saved Owain's life!

'How did he even spot me from so far away?!'

Owain shook his head. A better question was, how the hell had his cousin managed to slaughter a Blue from that distance? Without the bastard even noticing anything? Percy had made it look as effortless as swatting a damn fly!

Instinctively, Owain reached into his pocket with his good hand, clenching a wooden ocarina that he had treasured for over a decade. He was too busy training to play it nowadays, but he had spent countless hours teaching himself how to use it as a child: especially when he hadn't had playmates around. Recalling how his parents still winced whenever they saw it, he let out a chuckle.

However, not everyone reacted to Percy's arrival with as much joy, relief, or pride.

A purple flash swallowed the entire forest as something extremely large and fast shot toward the crow. Owain barely managed to close his eyes in time to avoid being blinded, though his vision was still consumed by white as a bolt of mana bigger than a house and probably powerful enough to obliterate an entire town reached the creature.

The ensuing shockwave nearly knocked Owain off the branch, a ringing sound stabbing into his skull as two warm trickles rolled down the sides of his head and neck. Thankfully, the heat from the explosion hadn't made it far enough to threaten him, otherwise he could only imagine his fate.

Fighting through his disorientation and slowly recovering his blurry vision, he tried to pinpoint where the attack had been fired from. It wasn't very difficult, since there weren't many mages in the forest who were both capable and willing to unleash such devastation on his cousin.

Sparks of electricity and wisps of fire still coiled wildly around Machaon's hands: further proof that he had just launched a spell far deadlier than any he had used against Archibald. The latter's clones leapt by the dozens to prevent Lord Asclepius from producing a second blast, but the only true White on the battlefield was too fast and hovering too high for the minions to catch him.

Owain ignored what the patriarchs: or anyone else: were doing, forgetting to even breathe as he studied the giant cloud of smoke that had yet to clear. Countless large objects rained down from the bottom, leaving thick gaseous trails in their wake.

Owain's heart sank as he identified them: a giant beaked head that had been split in three pieces, a semi-intact talon accompanied by its fragmented counterpart, along with several other chunks of the crow's torso and wings. Before it even reached the ground, the mangled flesh shattered completely into fine powder that scattered in the wind. If a Blue beast with a second core had failed to survive the blast, it was doubtful that a human mage of an even lower grade would have fared any better.

Before Owain had the chance to even process what his cousin's demise might mean for him and his loved ones, something changed again.

Howling winds blew from the north, causing the cloud of smoke to sway to the south and nearly clear up. A chill spread across Owain's skin, freezing solid every bead of blood or sweat that he had shed over the past hour, and soothing his burns slightly. It reminded him a little of the suffocating domain that had held him against the mud earlier, but this one was far, far stronger, yet didn't restrict him in any way.

The raging inferno that had turned about a third of the Whistling Woods into ashes and had been working its way through the rest of the forest suddenly receded, the building-sized flames shrinking to pitiful campfires that nearly went out completely. The world itself appeared to lose some of its colour, along with its brightness.

A murder of crows cawed from seemingly everywhere, even though every mundane bird and critter in the area should have long fled from the apocalyptic battlefield, or paid the price. They were accompanied by a chorus of shrill cries that sounded like an army of people scraping their nails against just as many chalkboards.

The strangest detail of all, however, was a faint melody that the louder, gloomier sounds failed to drown out. It was as if the whistling pines themselves: the few that were still standing, at any rate: had joined the symphony, their cones singing in tune with the crows and winds.

It was a gentle, consoling song, reminding Owain that the sun would rise again tomorrow, no matter what atrocities Machaon: or a thousand Machaons: committed. That his House would live on so long as a single person with Avalon blood survived this battle.

And that his cousin wouldn't be brought down so easily.

As the smoke finally cleared up, Owain realized that there was someone floating there, still alive and well. The bird was gone, and its rider unrecognizable. His tidy clothes had turned into a bunch of rags, their ends constantly tearing and regrowing as they mixed with the blizzard of ambient mana raging around him. It was impossible to tell where the man's robes ended and his boosting art began.

Percy's face had disappeared within the shadow of his hood, where a pair of pale orbs now burned softly. This time, Owain had no trouble recognizing the emotion oozing out of his cousin's eyes. Resonating with his domain, it shook Owain's mutated bones, the tree he was crouching on, and even the very air he breathed…

Chapter 694: [Redacted]

Based on the powerful domain shaking the entire battlefield, Archibald estimated that his grandson was now stronger than him or Machaon.

The image of the Red-born boy who had once spent every waking moment honing his spectral daggers and learning to safely activate his bloodline by his grandfather's side overlapped with the tall, cloaked figure that hundreds of hopeful and fearful eyes were currently looking at.

Archibald almost teared up, though he didn't dare to relax.

Lord Asclepius couldn't have predicted Percy's latest powerup, but there was a reason that he had waited for nearly a decade before invading, and they were about to find out what it was.

A confident smirk was still plastered over the enemy patriarch's lips right until he began breathing rapidly and deeply. Horrified, Archibald watched his opponent push his core beyond its limit, knowing full well what it meant.

'That explains why Machaon was so cautious earlier…'

The plasma mage had kept his reserves close to full. The only spell that had consumed slightly more mana had been the massive blast that he had just shot at Percy, and he'd already recovered.

A couple of seconds later, three sets of glowing lines lit up across the White's body. The indigo bolts of electricity and reddish-orange flames were familiar enough, but it was Archibald's first time seeing the pattern for the plasma affinity. Bright purple curves decorated Machaon's skin, intersecting with the other colours in several spots.

With the activation of Circulation, the enemy patriarch's domain grew significantly stronger, pushing back against Percy's. A spherical zone nearly two kilometres wide formed around Machaon, silencing the eerie symphony that permeated the forest and causing the trees within it to burst into flames even more intense than the previous ones.

A bitter smile crept onto Archibald's face.

This development wasn't all that surprising, really. He and Percy had speculated that their enemy's secret weapon had most likely been their own boosting art, stolen and repurposed against them.

If anything, they should be glad that Machaon had lacked a proper teacher. Having to piece together the scarce accounts of the spell from the bounty hunters and adapting it to his own affinities was the only reason it had taken the experienced patriarch so long.

‘This confirms that the Divine Root has allied with him. They were the ones who placed the bounty on Percy and provided a good chunk of the Blues chasing him,’ Archibald thought, reminding himself to keep an eye out for enemy reinforcements.

Machaon’s significant powerup only marked the start of House Avalon’s problems. Emboldened by their leader, the Violets fighting against Archibald’s subordinates activated their own versions of Circulation.

Three of them did, at least, though the mage injured by Galahad and one of the Violets fighting against Elaine hadn’t had the luxury of keeping their reserves close to full. Now that the cat was out of the bag, it wouldn’t be long before their teammates bought them enough time to prepare.

Archibald scanned the smaller battles happening on the ground with bated breath, afraid that the enemy Blues and Greens had also been taught Circulation. Fortunately, those fights continued as they were. Machaon had probably rushed here as soon as the last of his generals had mastered the technique, clearly having judged that waiting for the rest of his army to join them wouldn’t be worth the delay.

“Grandpa…” a strange voice: or rather, multiple voices: spoke in unison. Percy’s and Micky’s were the main, as well as the calmest ones, but a chorus of spectres cried shrilly alongside them, resonating with the powerful domain. “Help the others. We’ll handle him.”

Archibald nodded. It wasn’t like he had much of a choice. Circulation had only boosted the Violets’ strength by a relatively modest half a grade, but that was more than enough to shift the tide of the war the wrong way.

Gathering up the hundred-and-fifty-or-so clones that Machaon hadn’t already burnt to a crisp, Archibald sent them to reinforce his Blues, choosing to trust his grandson. Despite having his hands full with keeping his relatives from getting butchered, he maintained a sliver of attention on the cataclysmic battle that was about to determine their family’s: and possibly the entire planet’s: fate.

Without warning, a violent shockwave shook the space between Machaon and Percy, followed by several others. The two combatants had yet to move a centimetre, but their first contest had already begun.

It was one of pure willpower.

The colossal domains were no longer merely pushing against one another. They actively lashed out, like two invisible giants engaged in a brutal fistfight. Whenever their knuckles met, they created bolts of electricity that flailed around randomly. There weren't many trees still standing near Machaon, so the lightning that hit the ground merely carved deep trenches in dirt and ash, sending waves of soot rippling out to the rest of the forest.

Nobody seemed to gain the upper hand during this early clash. Or perhaps, Percy and Lord Asclepius were simply probing each other. That only lasted until Archibald's grandson did something that caused Machaon to leap aside, then up, before dodging many additional times in seemingly random directions.

Archibald couldn't see what the young man had hurled at his opponent, as even Mana Sense came up empty. Machaon had probably only noticed the perfectly-concealed attacks the moment they cut into his domain, evading them by the skin of his teeth. His movements grew more erratic by the second as the number of constructs trying to rip his soul to shreds presumably increased.

Eventually, Lord Asclepius appeared to grow tired of the constant harassment.

An ocean of plasma mana spilled out of his pores, mixing with his shrinking domain to form a condensed purple star about as large as a house, bathing the entire forest in its ominous light like a second sun.

It looked almost identical to the blast that he had fired at Percy, though he kept this one around his body, incinerating and shattering the incoming projectiles. It was only when the enchantments on the constructs failed that Archibald finally managed to sense them: a flock of hundreds of scythes: most of them now broken down into tiny pieces.

Machaon wasn't satisfied merely by protecting himself. After all, he had spent the past decade plotting to kill Percy, and his target was floating right before him.

Lifting his palms toward the cloaked figure, he fired multiple smaller blasts. "Smaller" was obviously a relative term, as each was larger than a carriage and packed enough power to disintegrate their family's mansion ten times over. The size of the projectiles allowed them to fly even faster than the massive comet from earlier, and Machaon was shooting them by the dozens.

Percy was forced to move for the first time this battle.

Thunderous shockwaves boomed beneath his feet as he zigged and zagged in three dimensions. Given the strength of his domain, he could have easily used it to fly in a smooth and consistent manner like every Violet did: and like his opponent had just done mere moments earlier.

Instead, he seemed to prefer focusing his strength on brief, carefully controlled jumps that made it look like he was teleporting around the battlefield and leaving afterimages behind.

Shockingly, these afterimages quickly proved to be more than optical illusions. Rather than vanishing immediately, they persisted, beginning to move on their own. A growing army of phantoms slowly formed, each looking identical to its creator!

At first, it had looked like Machaon had placed Archibald's grandson on the backfoot. His deadly composite affinity and boosting art allowed him to unleash a lot of destruction without putting a dent on his reserves.

A few hundred spells later, he was surrounded by so many scythe-wielding ghosts that hitting the real Percy became a statistical improbability. The constructs no longer bothered to dodge his attacks, welcoming the losses in their ranks as they danced outside his barrier, searching for an opening.

They didn't find one.

Despite their absurd numbers, they failed to penetrate the thick layer of plasma immolating anything that approached Machaon. They kept trying and getting crushed, leaving only tattered strips of grey silk and broken weapon fragments in their wake. The debris was pushed out of the purple sun, forming clouds of dirt that revolved around the two combatants.

Clearly realizing that nobody would land a hit at this rate, Machaon tried to break the stalemate. Flying upwards, he didn't stop until he was floating at least a kilometre above Percy, at which point he simply resumed shooting bolts of plasma at him.

The patriarch's action appeared almost pointless at first, though the meaning behind it revealed itself when Percy tried to avoid the projectiles.

He could dodge them as easily as before, or he could simply allow them to consume a couple of his phantoms as they continued unimpeded. The problem was that, due to Machaon's new angle, the blasts were now headed toward the forest. Unless the young man blocked them, he risked letting his relatives suffer unimaginable losses.

'Does that bastard not care about his own troops? And what if he kills somebody with our bloodline by mistake?!' Archibald asked himself with a grimace.

Maybe Lord Asclepius was simply that confident in his awareness of the other battles and his aim, or perhaps he was betting on Percy's willingness to inconvenience himself for the sake of his family.

Archibald considered asking those among his subordinates who didn't possess the Clone bloodline to stick close to those who did, or to their opponents, but the mere thought of treating his family as a bunch of shields left a poor taste in his mouth.

Either way, Machaon's gamble paid off.

Instead of avoiding the projectiles, Percy sent his phantoms flying directly toward them. It took dozens to completely block a single blast, causing his army to shrink rapidly.

In theory, Percy should be able to regenerate a small number of constructs faster than Machaon's blasts, because the ghostly figures directly absorbed ambient mana to grow and animate themselves.

However, Lord Asclepius still surpassed Percy and Micky by multiple grades, so the two of them had only managed to expand their troops to their current numbers after several minutes of accumulation. At this rate, they would run out in less than a minute, leaving them without distractions or the tools to nullify Machaon's magic.

Archibald scrambled his brain to think of a solution for his grandson. The simplest course of action would be to fly higher as well, to prevent the enemy patriarch from shooting at both the phantoms and the ground. Unfortunately, Machaon was unlikely to abandon a winning strategy, so he would probably keep firing at the forest regardless, forcing Percy to continue sending his constructs to their doom.

Apparently, the young man didn't need his grandpa to fight his battle for him, however, clearly having some ideas of his own. With seemingly no intention of returning to the previous stalemate, Percy called upon the ocean of debris that his failed attacks had produced. Rivers of magical silk, as well as a hail of grey ice and weapon fragments flew toward him, forming a growing cyclone around his body.

The pieces of discarded magic expanded and latched onto his robes, sucking vast volumes of ambient mana at a frightening rate. A blink later, two enormous wings stretched outwards, scattering the spiralling gusts and revealing a crow that utterly dwarfed the one that the young man had ridden into battle.

It looked even less natural, its plumage woven out of countless patches of silk frozen together. Fuelled by four mana cores and even more variants of the Dance, the size of the monstrosity far exceeded the limit of the Green or Blue grades. With a wingspan of nearly a hundred metres, it was about as large as a White beast: according to Archibald's estimates, at least, though he had never actually encountered such a thing.

Opening its beak wide, the monstrous bird let out an earth-rending screech that could hardly be likened to a cawing crow, revealing many rows of crescent-shaped blades within its cavernous maw.

Archibald's heart skipped a beat, as he almost forgot for a second that the abomination was on his side. Swallowing hard, he couldn't help but feel a pang of pity for the enemy patriarch who looked like a grain of rice before its hungry eyes.

Chapter 695: Giant crows and purple suns

The sight of the colossal crow appeared to give Machaon pause for the briefest of instants, though his apprehension didn't last. He resumed raining destruction upon the already-ravaged forest, probably having determined that his opponent's transformation hadn't truly changed the situation.

With a single flap of its enormous wings, the construct crossed the distance separating it from the plasma mage, just in time to intercept the indiscriminate attacks. As a side-effect of its new position, the bird's hulking frame blotted out the ominous glow of Machaon's mana, casting a vast shadow upon the entire battlefield.

Archibald couldn't see how much damage his grandson had taken from the spells, since only the underside of the crow was visible from his lower vantage point. However, the cacophony of booming explosions that reached his ears a couple of seconds later didn't bode well.

Clearly not one to take the hits lying down, Percy flapped his wings once again, closing the remaining gap and trying to clamp his beak down on something. The purple sun revealed itself once more as Lord Asclepius dodged to the side of the crow's head, barely avoiding being shredded by its scythe-shaped fangs.

While Machaon's barrier could stop a few: or even several: weapons and phantoms, he didn't seem confident in taking the entire abomination head on. Like a buzzing firefly, he danced around the bird, firing scorching columns of plasma from every angle, mostly aiming at its joints.

Percy was able to return some of the pressure by reorienting himself and continuing to peck at his opponent.

Archibald couldn't see what was happening inside the construct's body, but he assumed that it owed its passable agility: relative to its size: to its ability to phase parts of its mass into and out of existence, as well as the countless lightness runes engraved along the magical silk.

Unfortunately, the crow's bulk was Percy's only defence against the lethal plasma, on top of being his only means of protecting the forest. He couldn't turn too much of the construct's flesh incorporeal at once, thus severely restricting his ability to catch the pesky White.

Every bolt of plasma striking the abomination's body exploded with a blinding flash that forced even Archibald to avert his gaze. The Greens and Blues on the ground probably didn't have the luxury of paying attention to Percy's battle, but the constant environmental changes undoubtedly affected them even more strongly than Archibald and the Violet-level combatants.

A few of the weaker mages even gave up on their fights entirely, seemingly doing so after reaching a mutual understanding with their opponents. They all had their hands full just surviving the aftermath of the high-level clash, and it wasn't like the outcome of their own battles would have much of an impact on the war.

In theory, the Greens could assist the Blues if they won, who could then help the Violets. Finally, the Violets might be able to play a role in their leaders' fight. The problem was that, at the rate Percy and Machaon were going at it, one of them would probably die long before the smaller outcomes had the chance to trickle up to the top. With either of them dead, the war would lose its meaning. At least, this was the logic that Archibald ascribed to his subordinates' actions.

Unaffected by the choices of the Greens, Machaon continued pelting the giant bird with devastating attacks. Whenever the purple star disappeared behind the creature, Archibald was given a chance to examine the damage on the other side of its body.

It wasn't pretty.

Countless deep craters had eaten into the frozen silk, with parts of the plumage still ablaze or emanating thick plumes of smoke. The wounds constantly squirmed, a sea of roiling fabric greedily drinking ambient mana and expanding to fill in the gaps, though not nearly as rapidly as the enemy patriarch inflicted them.

Despite consolidating their accumulated mana into a single, hulking form, Percy and Micky hadn't solved the fundamental problem of their resources being consumed at an unsustainable rate.

Elated by the creature's shrinking body, Machaon unleashed his destruction on the forest with renewed vigour, forcing Percy to eat more and more blasts by the second.

The howling winds and eerie cries around Archibald grew quieter as his grandson seemingly retracted part of his domain, enveloping his construct. The potent willpower mixed with the ambient mana to form frigid gales that further shielded it from the damage and allowed it to spin even faster through the air.

With a violent revolution, the crow managed to finally land a savage blow with the back of its wing.

"Stop fucking up our home!" the chorus of voices erupted once more, the ill-concealed fury in their words sending a chill down Archibald's spine.

Machaon was able to cushion himself with a timely burst of plasma mana, but he was still sent flying outside the western boundary of the forest. Turning the bird entirely incorporeal, Percy and Micky shot behind him at a speed that was difficult to fathom.

Archibald considered chasing after his grandson, but many of his subordinates were still fighting, with the strongest ones in dire need of assistance. Sighing, he returned the rest of the attention to his clones.

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Machaon came to a halt close to the ground, the forest beneath his feet replaced by hills and grasslands. Reaching their opponent, Percy and Micky opened their cavernous beak wide in an attempt to swallow the bastard whole, though the latter didn't have much trouble dodging.

They consoled themselves upon realizing that their opponent had taken some damage from their latest attack. It was difficult to peer through the thick wall of plasma enveloping Machaon, but they could swear that there was a red vertical stain connecting the corner of the patriarch's lips and his chin: hopefully an evaporated trickle of blood.

Without any weaker mages nearby, Lord Asclepius had to abandon his previous strategy. Flying closer to the ground: almost stepping on it: he tried to rob the bulky crow of even more of its limited agility.

Percy and Micky could work around that by partially phasing through the obstruction, but that would only destabilize the construct further, making it easier for their opponent to hit their actual bodies.

Having no intention of playing the patriarch's game, they willed the crow to transform once again.

Their short, stubby legs grew several times longer, their talons crashing onto the ground with enough force to leave deep impressions and crack the nearest hill in half. Their torso rearranged itself into that of a humanoid, complete with a set of bulging abdominal and pectoral muscles.

Finally, their wings split into two pairs of arms that ended in clawed hands not too different from their talons. Each grabbed a fistful of debris that rapidly merged and expanded into long shafts, lined with hundreds of normal-sized scythe edges.

Shifting his stance, the hundred-metre-tall giant looked down on Lord Asclepius, pointing the upper pair of weapons at him while crossing the other in front of his chest.

Deciding to take Percy and Micky up on their challenge, Machaon shot straight toward them, slipping through the gaps between the jagged cleavers.

The giant responded by pivoting on his feet and spinning his torso just enough to strike the incoming meteor of plasma with his upper right shoulder.

Bouncing against the frozen silk without taking too much damage, Machaon flew above the construct's head, shooting half a dozen columns of mana into its back. Having clearly learned from the relative inefficiency of his earlier attacks, he focused the plasma into narrower beams that actually managed to pierce all the way through the giant's body.

The dance of the colossal gladiator and the firefly began anew, though Percy and Micky had a much easier time keeping up with the disgraced patriarch than before, due to having solid ground beneath their feet to use as leverage. Keeping Machaon in front of their body most of the time, they bent their elbows and phased their weapons through one another, trying to land another blow.

Lord Asclepius also seemed content with his newfound means of threatening their lives directly.

Percy and Micky could easily predict the patriarch's movements, so they were able to swim inside their construct to avoid being hit by the deadly pillars of plasma. The problem was that their body was still too sluggish to keep up with their senses or their opponent's nimble flight and reflexes honed by millennia of experience.

Every spell that Machaon cast shaved away a chunk of the giant's magical flesh. On the flipside, the frigid winds accompanying every swing of the cleavers peeled off a layer of plasma from the patriarch's barrier, causing the purple sun to shrink at roughly the same rate.

The crescents of soul-freezing ice continued on to carve deep ravines into the grasslands, with layers of grey frost spreading along their walls, while the stray blasts of plasma melted entire hills into magma that hissed as it poured into the frozen trenches.

Lord Asclepius had nothing to gain from his thinning defences, while Percy and Micky kept growing faster in exchange for their lost mass. Eventually, the cleavers moved fast enough that Machaon had trouble dodging them. He was forced to leap back to avoid getting cut in half, setting his sights on the forest again.

Percy gritted his teeth inside the construct when the patriarch fired several giant bolts of plasma at his relatives. He had no idea how good the man's aim was, but he knew that he couldn't risk it.

The giant's left side swelled before exploding into a murder of normal-sized crows. The flock of hundreds of birds turned ethereal as they chased the projectiles, overtaking and blocking them in no time.

Sadly, Machaon had already accomplished his sinister goal. Unleashing a new volley of purple blasts at what remained of the giant, he left Micky and Percy no choice but to abandon the crumbling construct.

The Lone Wanderer and Lord Asclepius didn't rush to resume their battle, opting to examine each other for a moment.

Percy and Micky were down to half of their reserves. Had this been a year ago, they would have already been on the verge of losing control of not only their boosting art, but even their artificial advancements. Thankfully, the promotion of their other three cores had lowered their floor to about a third of their total capacity, so they still had some leeway.

Estimating that the effect of their Blue trollsfury tattoo was about to expire, they reached into their spatial seal, emptying a few more vials directly into their bloodstream. Grabbing two intact scythes, they focused their willpower on them to ensure that they would last, their edges igniting with cold flames.

Machaon wasn't in a much better state, his own boosting art also close to coming undone. He was forced to shrink the barrier of plasma to about a tenth of its size, to the point that it now closely tracked the shape of his body instead of the previous sphere. Touching the scorching mana would still be deadly, but Percy and Micky now stood an actual chance of cutting through it to reach the patriarch's flesh and soul.

Seemingly happy with their mutual analysis, the two figures shot toward one another, fully intent on burying each other here today.

## Chapter 696: Grey worlds and horrific futures

A purple comet left a smooth trail of scorching plasma as it flew over the hills and grasslands, entangled with zigzagging lines of grey silk.

The Lone Wanderer's scythes carved crisscrossing scars on the ground, while Machaon's blasts melted everything indiscriminately. A hellish ocean of magma stretched for several kilometres, forming whirlpools and waterfalls as it flowed into the ravines.

Percy and Micky knew that receiving a single hit could prove deadly, though they struggled to put the same amount of pressure on their opponent. More than once, the edges of their weapons found their mark, only to melt and crumble away under the extreme heat without so much as putting a scratch on Machaon.

'Not sharp enough… not cold enough… not fast enough…!'

Percy's muscles tore and his joints made popping sounds as he strained his body beyond its limits. He was closing in on the third set of trollsfury vials, and the end of the battle was nowhere in sight.

Pouring as much mana as they could muster into the amplification and sharpness runes, he and his fellow aspect had to envelop the cracking constructs with their willpower to keep them from falling apart.

Their mana was of a lower grade than Machaon's, but it didn't matter. At its core, sharpness was the concentration of force at a narrower region, allowing even a mundane person's soft hands to cut into wood and stone with the right tools.

Embodying the very idea of sharpness, the Lone Wanderer sliced through everything in his path, his weapons whizzing closer and closer to the patriarch's skin.

He didn't stop there. Pumping soul-freezing ice into the heating enchantments, he caused the temperature in the entire battlefield to plummet. Ripping into the ocean of magma, the grey crescents released by his swings froze the liquid in their path, changing the landscape once more.

Machaon flew even faster, probably judging that the enchanted weapons were now capable of threatening him. Unfortunately for him, his movements only grew clearer in the Lone Wanderer's eyes as the Sage's Pond adapted to his fighting style.

A second pair of sleeved arms formed on Percy's cloaked body, grabbing just as many additional scythes. One attack flowed into the next as Micky's fighting instincts rose to the forefront of their shared mind, performing the savage dance of his ancestors.

The tip of a scythe nearly stabbed into the White's left eye, though he dodged it at the last second, countering with a straight punch shrouded in plasma. His fist tore into the grey cloak, splitting it in two, yet found no flesh inside either half.

The burning fabric twisted into a pair of short-lived phantoms that barely managed to swing at Machaon once before getting incinerated. It was enough to force him backwards, just as another invisible scythe appeared around his neck, about to behead him.

Ducking beneath the insidious crescent, the patriarch tried to elbow Percy's chest, though the latter deflected the attack with the three shafts that weren't mid-swing. The impact shattered the constructs, leaving the Lone Wanderer with a single usable weapon.

A familiar structure appeared on the horizon as the pair of Seventh Circle mages chased each other: the Oracle Mountain where Percy had once undergone the evaluation to identify his affinity and fuel his second core with mind mana. A veil of red mist shrouded the region as always, an elegant temple with hundreds of divine statues on its roof standing at the foot of the mountain.

Percy and Micky tried to steer the battle away, to avoid getting innocent bystanders involved.

Machaon clearly had other ideas. A sinister glint formed in his eyes as he realized that he had a new source of targets to distract his opponent with. Stretching his arm toward the temple, he began gathering mana in his palm.

Percy struggled to believe the patriarch's audacity. Was he willing to defile even Phoebe's temple if it meant getting the edge on him? To slaughter hundreds of people that had nothing to do with any of this just to land a single blow on his opponent?

Shocking as it was, it was obvious that this wasn't a bluff. Percy and Micky gritted their teeth as a horrific vision of the temple: and all the little children queuing up with their parents outside: burning to ashes manifested before their eyes.

“Enough already!” they yelled, a burst of mana and willpower propelling them forward as they tried to prevent that future from coming to pass.

Machaon shifted just enough to avoid getting split in half, though the scythe sliced through his extended limb, cutting through plasma, muscle and bone alike. The White winced as his arm got severed at the elbow, but that was just the start of his suffering.

The flesh near the stump blackened and grew brittle, as did his soul. His very existence flaked away as the destruction encroached along the remainder of the limb, though his willpower was able to stop the decay before it touched his shoulder.

Despite his injury, he didn’t give up. Purple mana spilled out of the wound, accumulating where his hand used to be. A bolt of plasma rapidly expanded, a blink away from obliterating the temple.

Carried forward by their angular momentum, Percy and Micky found it difficult to swing their scythe again in a timely manner. Instead, they kept spinning, delivering a brutal roundhouse kick on the patriarch’s face. Percy’s foot exploded into pieces of scorched meat and splinters of bone as the flames consumed the rest of his right leg in an instant, only slowing down enough for him to put them out halfway up his thigh.

Ignoring the pain, he grinned as he saw the White crash into the ground with enough force to form a crater nearly three metres deep and several times as wide. The last thing that Percy had felt with his destroyed limb had been the patriarch’s jaw cracking under his heel, so he considered this a worthwhile trade.

Unfortunately, the overall situation wasn’t in his and Micky’s favour. In theory, their fusion should allow them to produce a temporary replacement for his leg, but they didn’t have enough mana to spare, so they had to spend every mote wisely. Even the second pair of arms had been discarded at some point, not worth its maintenance.

Both they and Machaon had consumed most of their reserves, yet Percy and Micky were closer to their own limit, due to the restrictions imposed by their artificial advancements. To make matters worse, they were largely physical fighters, so the loss of Percy’s leg would affect them a lot more than the patriarch’s missing arm.

Lord Asclepius had probably realized that too. Holding his loose jaw in place with his willpower, his broken teeth formed a savage, bloody grin as he stood back up. His body was now visible in several spots, since he no longer had enough plasma to protect anything but his vitals. His skin was bare; his clothes having burnt to ashes a long time ago.

He shot toward the Lone Wanderer again, more than happy to resume a contest that he was already winning.

Knowing that they were going to get killed at this rate, Percy and Micky decided to unleash a technique that they'd been holding back since the start of the battle. It could have potentially broken through Machaon's defences as early as during their first clash above the forest, but it would have left them too drained to face any additional enemies that might be lurking about.

Sadly, they no longer had the luxury of worrying about that.

Countless invisible crows revealed themselves above the two combatants. Percy and Micky had slowly replenished their numbers over the last few minutes, though the constructs had been too weak individually to attack Machaon directly.

Their purpose was a different one.

Flying into one another, the birds shapeshifted and interlocked into rows of intricate symbols, blending into a massive formation. Experienced enough to realize how screwed he was, Machaon aborted his charge and turned around to flee.

Unwilling to waste their only chance, Percy and Micky poured every last drop of mana that they could afford to lose into the enchantments, though they didn't really have much. The runes were mostly fuelled by ambient mana and their previous accumulation, cannibalizing themselves to unleash the spell.

The world was drained of its colour, forming a black and white sphere a couple of kilometres across, with both combatants still inside. The Lone Wanderer would have rather avoided including himself in the blast, since the formation was more than powerful enough to injure him as well, though he hoped that his resistance to his own affinities and tempered soul would allow him to endure it better than his opponent.

Out of options, Machaon emptied his core and channels, giving up on his boosting art to envelop himself with another purple sun: a relatively small one that was only about fifty percent wider than the man was tall. The magical star was the only object within the grey region that retained its original colour, the potent mana and willpower resisting the influence of the giant formation.

Percy and Micky clenched their fists as the colourless zone slowly froze and gnawed at their soul, though they kept the enchantments running at full power to ensure that they would do their job.

The first of the interlocked symbols shattered a moment later, the grey light of the formation flickering in and out of existence as Machaon's final layer of protection remained mostly intact.

The Lone Wanderer was forced to improvise. He hadn't included any flow runes into the enchantments, so he mixed his domain into the blast, causing the freezing mana to spiral around the purple sun, rapidly grinding it down.

With every revolution, he peeled away some of the star's mass, brightness, and even colour, soon exposing the patriarch's body again. At first, it was just his feet, the magical blizzard shredding them into powder. As the orb of plasma continued to shrink, Machaon's left arm suffered the same fate, though he concentrated the rest of his mana around his torso and head to protect his vitals.

Eventually, the formation consumed that as well, the skin on the patriarch's face flaking off to reveal his skull as even the cartilage of his nose was torn away by the cold.

A single moment longer would have been enough to finish Lord Asclepius off once and for all, but Percy and Micky weren't that lucky. The rest of their enchantments fell apart, allowing the world to regain its colour.

Machaon's mutilated body landed on the ground with a muted thud, presumably slowed down by his domain at the last second.

Percy and Micky weren't doing much better, crashing near their opponent. The mana inside their channels and cores grew unstable, the Blue colour breaking up into strands of Green as the Green mana of the other affinities nearly degraded back to Yellow. The Lone Wanderer's artificial advancements were hanging by a thin thread. Firing a single spell was guaranteed to undo all of his hard work and leave him vulnerable.

Percy tried to empty the fifth set of trollsfury ink into his veins to keep himself going, but his body violently rejected the foreign substance this time, forcing him to stop once he started coughing blood.

Even his fusion with Micky felt on the verge of giving out. The stars in their mindscape wanted to snap back into a pair of separate constellations, since that was now their default state. Normally, overcoming their pitiful resistance and willing them to mix didn't take much effort, but even that was currently difficult for the two aspects to maintain.

Supporting himself on both elbows and one knee, the Lone Wanderer lifted his head weakly to examine his opponent's condition. Machaon couldn't move, clearly in an even worse state. However, he was still alive and conscious, looking back at the cloaked figure intensely.

Scanning their surroundings for anything that they could use to finish the patriarch off, Percy and Micky spotted a broken blade from one of the scythes a few metres away. Too tired to move, they willed it to fly into their hand, nearly stabbing themselves in the process. Then, they paused for a moment or two to gather up the strength to hurl it at Machaon.

Realizing that he was at the end of the rope, the patriarch tried to speak, though he was only able to spurt out a mouthful of blood. Trying again while presumably animating his jaw and compensating for his missing teeth with his domain, he shouted as loudly as he could:

"Theseus! How much longer are you going to wait?! I've already baited out his formation!"

Percy's features twisted into a grimace as his worst fears proved true. Fully aware that their window to act was shrinking by the second, he and Micky aimed the fragment as well as they could, hurling it at their opponent. They hadn't put much force behind it, so they doubted that it would be able to harm even a Blue. Thankfully, Machaon wasn't in any condition to block or avoid it.

Just as the spinning piece of grey mana was about to tear into the bastard's soul, a hand covered in glowing tattoos pinched it to a halt, crushing it under its fingers.

Percy and Micky hadn't even noticed the newcomer arrive, their Sage's Pond having shrunk to a pitiful size due to their exhaustion. Through blurry eyes, they noticed that the mage who had saved their

opponent was also a White, and he wasn't alone. A second landed right beside him, both with Circulation active.

Chapter 697: [Redacted]

"So, this is the young man who has flipped the whole planet on its head…" the White who'd saved Machaon muttered softly.

Through their blurry vision, Percy and Micky saw that it was a tall, middle-aged man with mostly dark hair, though a few white strands had appeared in his temples. Signs of aging were obviously rare for high-borns, and that was doubly true for one who had risen to the man's current grade. He had to be over ten thousand years old, making him not only older than Machaon, but possibly the single oldest mortal that Percy had ever seen on Remior.

He was dressed in elegant white robes embroidered with thin threads of solid gold, depicting a series of roots emerging from the underside of a cloud. The expensive clothes did little to conceal the White's muscular physique, though it wasn't clear whether the ancient mage's fighting style required a strong body, or working out was merely a hobby of his.

Percy wasn't the most knowledgeable about matters of the Great Houses, but even he knew enough to easily recognize Theseus: the man that Lord Asclepius had just requested help from, as well as the patriarch of the Divine Root.

Judging from the transparent, barely perceptible tattoos on his exposed skin, the patriarch probably possessed either the time or gravity affinity, and Percy was experienced enough to tell that it was the latter.

By his side stood a somewhat younger, lankier man, dressed in simpler but still clearly expensive black robes. He had short, blond hair and a pair of piercing blue eyes, the image of a lion sleeping on its front paws depicted on his insignia. He had to be Morpheus, the leader of House Ypnos.

Thankfully, the second White possessed a much-less-impressive water affinity, along with, hopefully, the same sleep-inducing bloodline as his subordinates: the one that Percy and Micky were immune to.

Seemingly not in a rush to resort to violence, Theseus took his sweet time scanning the ravaged battlefield, with Morpheus crossing his arms and waiting patiently for his partner to finish whatever he was doing.

Examining the bubbling ocean of lava that stretched as far as the eye could see, and the frozen patches of solid ground protruding from the liquid here and there, the gravity mage let out an impressed whistle.

His gaze eventually settled on the strange ground beneath everyone's feet. It was a disk-shaped platform several hundreds of metres wide, spanning the same area that the Lone Wanderer's apocalyptic formation had affected just minutes earlier. It was still covered in a thick layer of grey frost that showed no sign of melting.

The surrounding lava slowed down and froze before it came anywhere close to the magical ice, and the air above the crystalline floor was cold enough to make a person's breath visible. If somebody remained perfectly still for a couple of seconds, frost would begin to spread onto their boots. This had already happened to Theseus and Morpheus, so they had to shake themselves out of their fragile prisons.

"Not bad," the patriarch concluded, flashing Percy and Micky a warm, almost fatherly smile. "It seems that the rumours about you weren't exaggerated in the slightest. If anything, they'd fallen short. Say… do you think that there is any way to resolve this matter peacefully?"

Percy raised an eyebrow within the shadow of his hood, having not expected Theseus to attempt diplomacy at this late stage: especially when he appeared to hold all the cards.

Then again, it made sense. Unlike with Machaon, there was no deep-rooted enmity between them. Sure, the Divine Root had sent a bunch of bounty hunters after them in the past, but that had largely been Deimos' doing, and the sound mage had already paid the price for his crimes.

One might argue that Theseus still bore much of the responsibility for those events, since he was the leader of his family, but Percy wasn't going to drag the whole planet into a war just to settle a bunch of petty, personal grievances. The truth was that nobody but Machaon had anything to gain from the carnage.

Even the plasma mage would have probably been happy to drop the matter if given the option. Now that he could use the Aurora Dew to attain divinity, he no longer had a reason to keep the royal wasp

imprisoned or attack other families. Unfortunately for him, Phoebe wouldn't have let him off the hook if not for some type of deal to pose a challenge to Percy, and the latter had already rallied several Houses against Machaon.

Despite how reasonable Theseus sounded, Percy and Micky would be fools to place all their hopes on the possibility of sweet-talking their enemies into a ceasefire. Not in a hurry to respond to the gravity mage, they tried to take some precautions in case things went south.

'Nephthys, how much longer?' they asked through one of their cords. At the same time, they pushed themselves up to their single remaining foot, stabilizing themselves with their domain.

'She should be arriving in a couple of minutes,' the familiar responded promptly, though her answer caused them to smile bitterly.

A couple of minutes was an eternity under the circumstances. Discretely scanning their surroundings for reinforcements, Percy and Micky spotted two large armies marching in the distance. Unfortunately, they were coming from the wrong directions, so they had to be the Divine Root and House Ypnos' forces.

Thankfully, the weaker mages had been slowed down by the ocean of magma that they presumably had to cool or form bridges on.

Percy and Micky didn't dare to look away from the patriarchs, so they could only hope that their own allies were also approaching from somewhere behind them. Even if they were, it would be a while before they arrived.

'It's just us then,' they thought with a mental nod, reaching into their spatial seal and emptying a few vials of healing ink into Percy's veins while summoning their final trump card into one of their clenched fists. They didn't know if it would be enough to keep a pair of empowered Whites at bay, but they didn't have that many options.

Well, they did have a portion of Clear life mana in their seal as well. Metatron had allowed Percy to keep it as compensation for when a malfunction in the Vault's system had forced him to repair Cassiel's second core with his own resources. The potent source of healing would probably regrow Percy's missing leg in an instant, but he didn't want to consume something that he had no way of replenishing unless absolutely necessary.

The corner of Theseus' lips curled up as he clearly realized that Percy and Micky were stalling, though he didn't press them, probably thinking that he was in complete control of the situation.

"Depends," the Lone Wanderer finally responded to the patriarch's earlier question. "Are you prepared to let him die?" he asked while pointing at Machaon's mutilated body with his chin.

Lord Asclepius was probably in a lot of pain, but still conscious and staring back defiantly.

Percy and Micky didn't feel too strongly about the Divine Root and House Ypnos, yet they wouldn't even entertain the idea of letting Machaon off. Even if they ignored what the bastard had nearly done to the whole planet, there was no erasing today's bloodshed, nor the massacre of Nesha's family. Percy would never be able to look his girlfriend in the eye again if he struck a deal that involved sparing the mastermind behind the atrocity.

Theseus clicked his tongue in irritation, obviously unhappy with these terms. "Die? Just because you said so? Child, I've known Machaon for thousands of years: since before your House was founded. You were born yesterday."

"And yet, I've done more for Remior since yesterday than you old fossils ever did. Machaon almost tore everything down."

The patriarch sighed. "I won't deny that. I was also appalled when I heard what my friend had done, but there is no use in focusing on the past. The hive survived, and our world has grown stronger. Is this really a good time for Remior's most valuable assets to be killing each other? Right as we're in the process of evolving into a greater spring?"

Percy and Micky had to suppress a chuckle. "Valuable assets? The three of you lowlifes?"

"You insolent little–" Morpheus didn't appreciate the insult, trying to press the Lone Wanderer to the ground with his domain.

He was probably used to bullying the juniors in his family like this, but Percy and Micky weren't going to let a pompous asshole push them around. Exhausted as they were, they unleashed their willpower to block the patriarch's, distorting the air between them and causing the frozen ground to finally crack.

The leader of House Ypnos appeared ready to escalate, his core flaring with mana as his soul flickered with ill-concealed anger. However, Theseus raised his arm to calm his ally down, clearly not ready to give up on diplomacy just yet.

"No Yellow-born on Remior has reached the Clear grade yet, which means that, outside the Divine Order, the patriarchs of the Great Houses are the mages closest to the Concept realm. What would you call us if not assets?"

Percy and Micky shook their head. "You just have a bit of a head-start over the rest of us, that's all. I've seen the best that the universe has to offer, and the lot of you don't make the cut. Even here on Remior, I know plenty of people who will surpass you given enough time."

Morpheus clenched his fists hard enough to drain them of their colour, though he had no words to refute the Lone Wanderer's statement.

"Be that as it may, there is no need to resort to violence today. If we can all come to an understanding, the gods might choose to respect it," Theseus insisted.

Percy frowned, realizing why the patriarch of the Divine Root was being so cautious. Machaon had probably roped Theseus into joining by fearmongering about Percy's potential retaliation. Theseus was afraid of letting him be, as he would eventually grow too powerful for even a White to handle, and Theseus might no longer even have Machaon and Morpheus by his side when that happened.

At the same time, the gravity mage had to understand that harming Percy was inherently risky. Since Phoebe actively wanted them to push him, she might not punish them if they ended up killing him. Even if she did, she might focus on Machaon: who had committed a crime worthy of death: rather than his reluctant accomplices.

Still, Theseus had no way of being certain, so his best course of action was to play both sides and try to broker some kind of agreement, while defaulting to Machaon's side when push came to shove.

Technically, Percy and Micky had a way to put the patriarch's worries to rest. Using Kerfyl's Decree, they could sign a binding spectral contract with Theseus and Morpheus that would prevent either side from going after the other in the future, so long as they were willing to hand Machaon over to die.

However, they didn't even bother to bring that possibility up. Since the two Whites had chosen to work together with a piece of shit like Machaon, they could follow him to his grave. Remior's nobility was long overdue for new leadership anyway, and the Lone Wanderer had no intention of placing such restrictions on his soul for their sake.

Likely having realized that Percy and Micky had made their minds up, Theseus finally decided to drop all pretences. A vision of a thick column of pure force manifested above their head, about to stomp them into meat paste. Their Sage's Pond still wasn't working properly, but the patriarch wasn't trying to be sneaky.

With Percy's body sore from head to toe and his unstable mana being entirely off-limits, he only had his willpower to rely on. There was no way his domain would be enough to stop even one of his opponents, let alone both.

But what if he had four domains?

Clenching the zelesian beads inside his hand, he willed them to activate, thanking his lucky stars that he'd had the foresight to hold onto them with his main body after recharging them, instead of passing them on to the clones.

An explosion of pure force shattered and peeled away not only the ice beneath Percy's foot but even several metres of rock underneath that, expanding towards his opponents.

The Symphony of a Dead Winter reached a new crescendo as the gravity spell hanging above the Lone Wanderer's head burst into colourless motes like a mere soap bubble. The enemy patriarchs were too preoccupied with escaping the shockwave to form a new attack.

Since Machaon was completely naked and didn't even have any limbs, Theseus was forced to grab his mutilated colleague by the neck, slinging him over his shoulder like a blood-soaked sack of potatoes as he and Morpheus flew away.

Mixing with the Lone Wanderer's actual domain, the ones produced by the transparent orbs shook the entire platform with enough force to crack even Percy's reinforced bones, despite him being the owner of the willpower in theory.

His domain didn't grow four times stronger: not exactly: since those of the beads still fell a little short of the real thing. They were also difficult to control, feeling rather stiff and unresponsive. Even if they had been identical, a quantitative upgrade wouldn't necessarily translate to the corresponding qualitative improvement.

Despite its shortcomings, the violent hurricane of willpower spiralling around Percy and Micky was undoubtedly the closest thing to a demigod's domain that anyone on Remior had ever produced without reaching the Clear grade.

Overcoming their shock, Theseus and Morpheus probably realized that they had to get rid of their opponent now: before he received help. They unleashed a desperate barrage of gravity and water blasts, trying to pulverize the weakened figure hiding within.

Percy's brain throbbed painfully against his skull as he and Micky struggled to bat each and every incoming spell aside. The fact that they couldn't properly predict their trajectories wasn't helping, nor was their inability to move a centimetre from their spot to dodge, chase after their opponents, or meaningfully fight back.

In theory, the beads inside Percy's hand were perfectly mobile, so the domain they released could follow him around, though the stiff willpower was difficult to wield even when held steady, and Percy's body was still a complete mess. Even if he consumed the life mana to regrow his leg, the instability inside his cores made it difficult to move.

After what felt like forever: but had probably only been a minute or two: an enormous shape tore through the clouds, entering the battle in a manner not too dissimilar from what Percy and Micky had done earlier.

And just like the two of them while chasing Machaon around, the newcomer was an airborne beast about a hundred metres from antennae to stinger, her ruby carapace illuminated by four sets of amber, indigo, azure and purple lines, shrouded in a film of bubbling acid.

The three mages duking it out on the ground were forced to slow down as the colossal creature landed behind Percy with six deafening thuds that caused the whole area to shake.

A fourth domain more powerful than a regular White's joined the clash as the Starry Queen's: no... The Ruby Empress': compound eyes reflected the mutilated body of the man who had stolen her daughter from her.

Chapter 698: Reinforcements

Nobody had any idea how much life the Ruby Empress still had in her: not even the enormous wasp herself.

She'd claimed to have been alive for several centuries already: possibly even millennia: though she hadn't had any reason to keep track of the passage of time until recently. Before Machaon's infiltration, the gods and mortals living above her underground kingdom had left her and her descendants largely unbothered.

So long as the smaller bugs kept spilling over to the surface and providing humanity with enough nectar, the nobles didn't care about the rest of the creatures, nor about the succession from one Starry Queen to the next.

A few thousand years weren't much to a Violet, but she was clearly old enough to have approached her promotion despite having intentionally and regularly starved herself to delay it. Bugs generally didn't live as long as other animals either, and she had cut what was left of her lifespan even shorter while experimenting with the creation of a second heir.

That was all to say that it was lucky that she had survived the past decade, though she might still die of old age in a year, or a century: hell, she might even drop dead in the middle of this very battle.

But until then, she was arguably Percy and Micky's most powerful ally.

Her recent evolution into the first White beast in Remior's history had turned her into a force to be reckoned with. It had also tripled what little time she had left, as had the first-generation tea that Percy had given her. She would probably never become a quasi-divine beast, but she might live long enough for her second core to advance once or twice more, stretching her time a little further still.

More pressingly, she had entered the battlefield with her boosting art already active.

While Percy had taught her the Dance, the Masterful version of the spell for the beast affinity relied on the consumption of other mana types. Since her second core was still at Green, she wouldn't be able to draw much power from it, so she was functionally just another White with Circulation, like the enemy patriarchs.

The good news was that advancing her primary core had allowed her to develop the same mutations as Nephthys: or at least the ones that had come from the familiar's acid, water, and lightning affinities, though not those she owed to her divine soul, internal world, or connection to Percy. Between her advancement and the more efficient conversion of mana, her royal jelly output had also increased greatly, though that was a story for another day.

The reinforced carapace that she had obtained back when her exoskeleton had only been a fraction of its current size ensured that the Lone Wonderer wouldn't have to worry too much about her safety.

Especially since she hadn't come here alone.

Over thirty humans leapt off the creature's back, flying out of a spacious bubble of willpower that they had jointly erected to shield themselves from their mount's acidic coat. They landed between Percy and one of the Empress' colossal limbs, ready to assist.

Four were Violets: Flamel, Paracelsus, Anqi and Eleazar, with Ostanes being the only Violet among the Guild's six elders who had stayed behind to guard the settlement. Orin hadn't come here either, as Percy didn't think an additional, relatively-inexperienced Blue combatant would have made enough of a difference in the war to be worth risking his mentor's life.

The other twenty-eight mages were among the Guild's strongest Blues: typically those who had spent decades hunting atop the giant mushrooms before their promotions. Everyone in the group had been taught Circulation after signing a non-disclosure agreement with Percy sometime in the past year.

Without Archibald around to help with their physical conditioning, and with Percy and Micky too busy to brew Blue healing potions for them, the alchemists had had to guzzle down enormous quantities of Yellow potions that they had compressed themselves. It had been the only way to exercise their bodies

several times per day and meet the requirements of the Refined spell in so little time. Thankfully, their hard work had paid off in the end.

Percy and his reinforcements had left the Fungal Spire at the same time, but he had flown on ahead to get to his family sooner, since he was much faster than the giant creature or her passengers. This was also why the Empress hadn't brought any of her subjects with her. The smaller wasps simply couldn't keep up with their ruler, nor could the rest of the Guild's Blues.

Meeting Micky: who had flown all the way from Twilight City: just outside the Camelot province, Percy had arrived at the Whistling Woods alongside his fellow aspect.

The first wave of allies had finally caught up, but would it be enough?

Percy and Micky weren't sure. Neither the Ruby Empress nor the old alchemists could be considered elite fighters, but it wasn't like their opponents had had many opportunities to get their hands dirty in the last millennium or so. Theseus and Morpheus might not even recall the last time they'd fought a battle to the death.

The White beast's bulky frame would make it difficult for her to catch a nimble human, but putting a dent on her body wouldn't be easy either, and her domain wasn't any weaker than the patriarchs'.

Assuming that she could handle one of them, the four Violets and dozens of Blues would probably be able to hold the other at bay. Percy and Micky couldn't help them much, because they were currently rooted to the ground, barely standing on one leg and keeping their cores from degrading.

If anything, the arrival of the newcomers had only made it harder for the Lone Wanderer to participate in the battle, because it took a lot of attention to prevent his rampaging domain from harming his allies.

Thus, nobody attacked.

The two sides merely put some distance between them, staring each other down in hatred. The Empress and alchemists wanted Machaon to pay for his crimes against the hive, while the three patriarchs needed Percy dead to ensure their survival.

Dozens of domains collided with enough force to split the ground, forming a ravine so deep that Percy and Micky struggled to see the bottom in their current state. It was over fifty metres wide, and long enough that the approaching armies would be able to comfortably stand behind it.

The enemy Whites didn't appear very concerned, more than happy to wait for their underlings. The two of them might not be powerful enough to beat Percy, the giant wasp, and the alchemists by themselves, but it would be trivial to do so with the addition of several Violets and Blues in their ranks.

Scanning the approaching mages, Percy and Micky estimated that the Divine Root and House Ypnos had each sent about as many people as House Asclepius. Unfortunately, their own relatives were too busy fighting against Machaon's to come to their aid.

Aware of how grim the situation was, they anxiously looked behind them, heaving out a relieved sigh upon spotting a few smaller forces heading their way. Of course, their relief only lasted until they counted the approaching families and realized that there weren't nearly as many as they had expected.

Over fifty smaller Houses had cozied up to House Avalon over the past decade, trying to ingratiate themselves to Archibald and Percy, while providing all sorts of gifts and pledges of an alliance. Evidently, only four of those families had meant their words.

'It's possible that some were simply too far away to reach us in time, but the end result is the same…'

Alas, they would have to make do with the people they had.

The good news was that a fifth, larger force was also marching to Percy's aid. It was House Etna, the only Great House to have openly sided with his family. Considering how few friends he and Micky had managed to gather, the runecrafting House's help might just make all the difference.

Over the next few minutes, the encroaching armies steadily advanced through the ravaged battleground, converging toward the ravine. The four smaller Houses that had come to the Lone Wanderer's aid had brought fewer combatants in total than even one of the Great Houses. Thankfully, it seemed like Theseus and Morpheus had only had enough time to teach their Violets Circulation, much like Machaon had.

Percy and Micky regretted not spreading their boosting art to more of their allies. The irony of their enemies knowing it while those on their side didn't wasn't lost on them, but they had been too busy with their artificial advancements over the past year to fly around Remior forming contracts and teaching spells. Before learning that Machaon and his comrades had reverse-engineered the boosting art, Percy hadn't wanted to risk it leaking.

'We'll make it up to them after the battle,' they decided, carving the faces of the families who had chosen to help them into their memory. Each would be given enough Aurora Dew to drown in and be taught the complete Dance: assuming that they survived.

At the helm of the nearest friendly army was a giant man: a proper giant, over thirteen metres tall: not just a burly person. Dozens of slightly shorter men and women rallied behind him, the Blues ranging between ten and eleven metres tall, while the Greens were typically between eight and nine.

The giants all had ruby-coloured teeth and fingernails that gleamed ominously under the soft glow of the surrounding magma. Their thunderous steps shook the battlefield as the normal-sized mages among them used various tricks to keep the ground under the giants' feet solid enough to support their weight.

Percy recognized them as House Talos, led by Fyn, their newly-promoted patriarch. Percy and Nesha had tried to sell them Aurora Dew during their time in the Guild, though the operation had only lasted a few months before Fyn and his father, Bronn, were forced to reveal the existence of the miraculous elixirs to the Divine Root to buy protection from a rival family.

Feeling guilty over her "mistake" of approaching an unreliable trading partner, Nesha had used her influence with the Black and White Syndicate to look into the matter a few years ago, only to uncover that it was Machaon who had subtly aided House Antaeus: the enemies of House Talos: for no other reason but to paint a target on her and Percy's backs.

After being provided with evidence of the disgraced patriarch's duplicity, Fyn had been among the first to apologize to Percy and join the alliance. His family's Gigantification bloodline might not be the most powerful out there, but it paired quite well with the red powder that Percy and Micky had brought back from Ruby Heart.

Not everyone had the same motivations for joining, however.

House Yeepas, for example, had only agreed to assist House Avalon due to the close proximity of their provinces. The two families hadn't always been on the best terms, as House Yeepas had even tried to annex part of Archibald's land during his imprisonment in the Fungal Spire.

The neighbouring nobles could have just as easily chosen to side with the Great Houses. The problem was that stabbing Archibald and Percy in the back a second time came with huge risks. Considering that they had already been on thin ice with House Avalon, the last thing they had wanted had been to keep provoking the monsters living next door.

Other families had come here to improve their standing with the Alchemists' Guild and ingratiate themselves to the rising eighth Great House, or simply because they condemned Machaon's actions.

More and more mages gathered on either side of the rift, with everyone at Blue or higher adding a domain to those already clashing. The enormous ravine kept deepening, widening, and stretching, as rivers of artificially-produced lava poured into the chasm from the surrounding battlefield, mixing with an ocean of naturally-formed magma bubbling up from the depths.

Thousands of cautious nobles stood silently, gauging the numbers and fighting strength of their opponents while trying to determine which side held the upper hand.

## Chapter 699: Standoff

It wasn't obvious at a first glance which army held the advantage, so the enemy patriarchs initially attempted to peel some of Percy's allies away using diplomacy: if threats of complete annihilation could even be called that.

"Are you sure that this is wise, Lord Talos?" Theseus asked as soon as the giant man reached the others, towering over everyone but the wasp. "I shouldn't have to remind you, but the Divine Root's agreement to protect your family for the next two hundred years will be revoked the moment you take action."

Fyn grinned. His enormous mouth: full of crimson teeth: made the seemingly innocent action appear terrifying.

"Fuck your agreement," he spat, his size causing his voice to sound like a war horn. "It was a bunch of horseshit anyway. Machaon nearly burnt my House down just to hurt a girl he didn't like, and you

bastards executed my father for the crime of buying a few elixirs. Say what you will about House Avalon, but they have always dealt with us fairly."

Theseus scowled, though he no longer bothered with the lesser families. He shifted his gaze to the only White-cored human who stood against him. "And you, Periphetes? Our families have worked closely for longer than either of us has been alive. Do I need to explain how much chaos beheading three of us will bring?"

The leader of House Etna was a short, rotund man, dressed in tacky golden robes and covered from head to toe in jewellery. He averaged a pair of rings on each finger, had three different amulets and necklaces visible over his tunic, with possibly more hidden beneath his undergarments. And that was without even mentioning the dozens of bracelets hanging loosely along his forearms.

Interestingly, every accessory and centimetre of fabric was heavily enchanted, though most of the runes didn't seem particularly useful. This was Percy and Micky's first time seeing the man in person, and they weren't completely familiar with House Etna's runecrafting language, but they did know enough about it to tell that the majority of enchantments would merely glow in odd ways, make funny sounds, or perform other silly parlour tricks. The short patriarch clearly enjoyed tinkering with runes and wearing the results of his experiments as trophies.

Hearing his fellow White's warning, Periphetes chuckled, before removing one of the rings on his left thumb and tossing it over the chasm. It was one of the few objects on his person that had been engraved with the Vault's magiscript.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

Theseus frowned, picking up the ring that had landed by his feet and examining it carefully. It was made of a dark material, specked with glowing dots that had been rearranged into the shape of the runes. "A spatial device, I'm guessing?"

Periphetes nodded. "It has three times the capacity of my previous best, and I'm still learning the new language."

The patriarch's face beamed with childlike glee as he spoke. No wonder he was the only White who had broken ties with Machaon. The man was a proper runecrafting nerd, and Percy had probably given him the best gift that he had ever received.

"I don't understand what the capacity of your ring has to do with any of this," Theseus replied, clearly confused.

"Everything!" Periphetes said, before elaborating. "It's not just the spatial devices. You're all focusing too much on the Aurora Dew and the boosting art, but the new runecrafting language has revolutionized every single one of our enchantments. Do you have any idea how busy we've been over the past decade? We've had to not only relearn everything from scratch, but tear down all of our facilities and past projects to rebuild them with better runes."

Still facing Theseus, he pointed at Percy with his right thumb.

"So don't talk to me about chaos. Chaos is all this young man knows to stir, but that's not always a bad thing. Iterating and improving upon one's work is an important skill for an enchanter, yet the best of us need to know when it's time to toss everything in the garbage and start fresh."

Theseus sighed, probably realizing that the few families who had dared to come here had already made their minds up about their allegiance. "You'll all die. We still have more mages," he said while infusing his willpower into his voice to ensure that everyone standing on the other side of the rift heard him.

"Last time I checked, we had three more Violets and just as many Whites as you," Fyn replied using the same method.

The leader of the Divine Root shook his head. "Only some of whom are using the boosting art."

Percy and Micky's presence was probably the only reason the Great Houses hadn't attacked yet, their powerful domain being the primary cause of the enormous rift that had split the battlefield in two. The others had also contributed, but most of the willpower had come from the Lone Wanderer, since pouring it into the chasm was the easiest way to vent it away from his allies.

The problem was that the enemy Whites had probably realized by now that Percy and Micky weren't free to wield their final trump card as they pleased. What they hopefully hadn't figured out, was that the zelesian beads would run out of juice in about an hour, of which half had already passed.

The Lone Wanderer was actually under a lot of pressure to put an end to the war before that happened, though he couldn't just urge his allies to hurry up, lest he alerted his opponents to the fact that he was on a short timer.

Morpheus walked up to Theseus, grabbing Machaon who was still slung over the White's shoulder and tossing him to one of his Blues to carry away to safety. Then, he whispered something in his partner's ear while erecting a small funnel of willpower and water around his mouth to ensure that nobody else would hear him or read his lips.

The patriarch of the Divine Root clearly didn't like whatever the water mage had said, as his features twisted into a grimace. However, he eventually nodded, gesturing at his men to retreat.

The corner of Percy's lips curled into a bitter frown as he stared at his enemies' shrinking backs. Some of his allies flashed him questioning looks, clearly wondering whether they should give chase. As much as he wanted them to, he begrudgingly shook his head, knowing that he currently lacked the ability or time to fight beside them.

It wasn't difficult to figure out what Morpheus had told Theseus. They had already achieved their secondary objective today, by surviving the battle with newfound knowledge of the Dance. There was no need for them to gamble their lives in an uncertain clash when the next one would be even more favourable for them.

Clenching their fists, Percy and Micky focused on the near-skeletal torso of the man who had started all of this.

'We had him right in front of us… powerless and beaten to a pulp. We just had to fire one more attack!'

The most frustrating part was the knowledge that they would have won if they had picked one of the other active-type Decrees from the tournament. They could have overpowered the plasma mage without resorting to their giant formation, finishing the bastard off even in their exhausted state and despite Theseus' meddling.

But they hadn’t. They had chosen Kerfyl’s Decree instead. And for what?

Just to give Zurvanai a third mana core.

Allowing themselves to finally separate, a disabled human covered in tattered rags and a regular-sized crow plopped down on the shattered platform weakly.

‘We made the decision knowing the risks,’ Micky said through their connection. ‘At least our contracts will help us ensure that our allies show up when they are supposed to from now on. We’ll also be able to share more of our secrets with them without worrying about them leaking.’

Percy nodded, anxiously shifting his gaze toward the forest. He was about to ask his fellow nobles and alchemists to help his relatives out, since he was in no condition to do so himself.

However, there didn’t seem to be a need for any of that, as an army dressed in House Asclepius’ colours appeared to be retreating from the northwestern side of the Whistling Woods, a few kilometres away from Percy’s current location.

Only about forty percent of their original mages remained, and Percy wasn’t sure whether it was his grandfather who had driven them away, or Theseus and Morpheus who had somehow communicated with Machaon’s generals from afar, warning them that they were about to get attacked from behind. Either way, Percy’s relatives weren’t chasing after their opponents, nor were they rushing to his aid, which probably meant that they had also suffered greatly.

The Lone Wanderer’s first clash with Machaon was officially over. The disgraced patriarch had won.

## Chapter 700: Exodus

“Thanks for saving my brother,” Elaine said, though she sounded nothing like her usual cheerful self.

It was hard to be, given how tired she was, and how many relatives she had just watched die. Even her father was currently unconscious, having suffered serious injuries at the hands of a Blue with a fire

affinity. Thankfully, Archibald had already tended to his son and reassured his grandchildren that Gawain would be alright after some rest.

At least Owain had made it out of the scorched forest in one piece. The boy was understandably a little rattled, but that would hopefully just motivate him to train harder and not do anything dumb in the future.

“He’s lucky that he stood out as the only person with a Yellow core on the battlefield,” Percy replied.

Saying those words felt strange, since Percy was technically also a Yellow beneath the seals. Still, Owain was just fourteen, and had clearly bitten off way more than he could have possibly chewed.

Elaine nodded.

The two cousins were standing outside the mansion, watching as the non-combatants of their family emptied out the building, stuffing as many of their possessions as they could into dozens of spatial amulets, and loading the rest onto carriages.

House Avalon only possessed a small stable, fused into a side of their main building. There was only enough space for a handful of horses, which was fine because people rarely rode them. Those at Yellow or higher could travel just as fast: if not faster: on foot, while Reds and Oranges almost never had a reason to leave the province.

While this wasn’t much of a problem on any other day, it made the current relocation of the entire family exceedingly complicated. The life users would probably need to have whatever clones had survived the battle carry both people and objects to the Fungal Spire. Even then, it would take multiple trips to move everything.

But it had to be done.

Between the Alchemists’ Guild and the tens of millions of wasps under Percy’s control, House Avalon technically possessed more than enough power to protect themselves against an attack like today’s. The problem was that the insects couldn’t survive away from the Fungal Spire for an extended period of time, nor could the alchemists abandon their responsibilities and leave the whole planet without elixirs.

It made more sense to move the family near the settlement and was something that they should have probably done sooner.

Their allies had offered some assistance with moving, but they couldn't stay in the Camelot province for long. They had their own territories to defend, and rivals who had undoubtedly taken advantage of their absence to advance their goals.

Archibald was busy tending to the most seriously wounded, though Percy knew that his grandfather was impatient to pass those not in critical condition to the other healers, so that he could begin replacing his clones. The patriarch would need weeks to replenish his decimated army, leaving their family vulnerable to a follow-up invasion until then.

It was unlikely to happen, since Theseus and Morpheus would hopefully be busy healing Machaon and trying to piece together what they had just learned about the Dance, yet this was way too important to leave to chance.

The urgency to restore some semblance of their House's fighting strength was also why Archibald had fixed Percy's leg before healing anyone else, despite his grandson's injury not being life-threatening. Furthermore, it was one of the main reasons Percy and Micky had rushed to rein their rampaging mana in, stabilizing their artificial advancements and refilling their cores and channels.

Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to reverse their partial demotion merely by gathering more mana, otherwise they would have managed to do that during the stalemate across the ravine or by asking Nephthys to consume a few Yellow wasps and send them the soul mana. Fixing the Cradle had required Percy and Micky to carefully work alongside their seals to re-compress their reserves: something too delicate to be done in the middle of a domain clash.

After repairing his grade and mentally noting the threshold that he had to avoid falling under in the future, Percy had used his bloodline to try and possess Machaon. There hadn't been any other Whites on the planet in such a critical condition, so finding him hadn't been difficult for the clone. He had hoped to forcefully enter the patriarch's body and mess up his soul from within, to finish him off.

The problem was that the other Whites had managed to stabilize their colleague's condition by the time Percy attempted his assassination. Even a healer of Archibald's calibre would probably need an entire week to fully mend Machaon's devastated body, and Percy wasn't even sure his enemies had somebody that skilled, but healing him just enough so that he wouldn't die if left alone hadn't been too difficult, apparently.

Micky was currently sitting inside Percy's old room, pouring their shared domain into the zelesian beads. The transparent marbles were down to about a third of their capacity, so it would take over a week to refill them. A small price to pay, considering how much the priceless artifacts had helped just hours earlier.

"Elaine… I'm sorry that I brought this upon our family," Percy muttered hoarsely.

"Don't be," she said with a strained smile. "It's not your fault Machaon did what he did to the wasps, nor was it wrong of you to expose him."

"Still. I could have ended this war today if I had made different choices. We wouldn't have had to leave our ancestral home," he insisted.

Percy had lived away from the mansion for a very long time, and it wasn't like he had always appreciated this place in his youth. Even so, some of his fondest memories were from within those wooden walls, or among the now-destroyed pines in the distance, and he knew that this was doubly true for Elaine.

His cousin sighed, scanning the mourning faces of those who had lost somebody close to them, the strained expressions of those labouring toward their expedient relocation, and the line of charred trees in the horizon. They had already put out the fire, but about eighty percent of the Whistling Woods had burnt down. What was left of the forest still emanated plumes of black smoke and would take decades to regrow.

Leaving their province was more than an inconvenience. The neighbouring families were unlikely to get any funny ideas of invading again, so House Avalon's lands would hopefully remain intact until they were ready to reclaim them. However, moving far away from their towns would leave their commoners without support.

Archibald would have to arrange for people to check up on them regularly, delivering any vital resources that they might lack, all the while hoping that their enemies wouldn't decide to take their anger out on the peasants. Then again, Machaon and his goons could already do that if they wanted, since it was impossible for House Avalon to station enough people in each of their towns to defend against multiple Great Houses.

With any luck, distancing themselves from the commoners would be safer for everyone involved.

“Let’s not play that game. We could have all done things differently,” Elaine said, shaking her head. “I’m sure that Grandpa is currently blaming himself for not moving us earlier, and I can also think of half a dozen decisions that I could have made while practicing my spells that might have allowed me to beat my opponents and help you and Grandpa.”

“I suppose…” Percy responded weakly, though he wasn’t convinced.

Balling her fist, Elaine playfully punched his shoulder like she used to do when they were young. Only, it didn’t hurt this time, and not because she was weak by any stretch of the imagination. By anyone’s standards, Elaine could be considered an absolute monster, her rise through their family’s ranks having been nothing short of meteoric. She still had a grade on Percy, but only one instead of two, and his physique was more than strong enough to absorb the impact.

“Don’t ‘suppose’ me,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Didn’t you just beat the living crap out of a White? I know that you like aiming for the stars, but some of the smaller things are still worth celebrating.”

It was true. Their enemies might have come out on top after the recent clash, but Percy and Micky had fought quite well at a personal level. Even their family had performed better than Machaon’s, having lost fewer mages both as a percentage and as a raw number.

Percy had been so caught up in his family’s losses, the aftermath of the fight, and what it would mean for everyone moving forward, that he had failed to appreciate how shocking his performance actually was.

He was a Red-born, not even fifty years old, and he had just turned the patriarch of a Great House into a disfigured cadaver! Machaon was a monster who had lived over a hundred times as long as Percy, had further boosted his strength through the very spell that he had stolen from Percy, and was still only alive right now because of his allies.

“Do you finally get it?” Elaine asked upon seeing that his mood had improved slightly. “Today was a slap in the face for all of us, but that’s all the more reason to make sure we win the next one.”

Percy nodded, resolving himself to do whatever it took to protect himself and his loved ones.

It wouldn't be easy, because their enemies had just received a major power-up in the form of the Dance. Considering that Machaon had spent a decade trying to wrap his mind around Circulation, it would probably be a while before he figured out the much-more-demanding Masterful spell and spread it to his forces. Percy would have to figure out a way to keep up.

His allies would learn the technique even faster under his guidance, but he was more worried about the top-level combatants. The enemy patriarchs would effectively grow half a grade stronger, while Percy and his family wouldn't, because they were already using the complete Dance.

'We'll need to rope more allies into joining us, and find new ways of growing stronger,' he thought.

Now that he and Micky were done with the void tournament and their artificial advancements, there was no major project eating up their time. They could finally redirect their attention to the clones, and all the smaller things that they had previously placed on hold.

"And… there's one more thing I've been meaning to tell you," Elaine said, breaking Percy out of his thoughts.

"Hmm?"

She pointed at a certain patch of grass in the garden, next to the stump of a tree that Percy used to practice his spells on as a teenager.

"Remember what I said the last time we were sitting there, chatting? I don't think I ever apologized for it."

Percy smiled. He'd never forgotten, even before his fusion with Micky gave him eidetic memory. His cousin had spoken out of concern: not malice: but her words had still hurt, due to how self-conscious Percy used to be about his birth grade.

She'd asked him to stop practicing with his bloodline. That it hadn't been worth hurting himself, because even if he had become the strongest Yellow on the planet, it wouldn't have mattered. And yet, here they were, a few short decades later.

Elaine smiled too. "I'm sorry, cousin. I was wrong."