Wanderer 701

Chapter 701: Tale of a doting sire

Several years earlier

The young ones had fallen behind again, forcing him to stop and wait. This had been a problem ever since his accursed spawn hatched from their eggs and had only grown worse after his recent evolution.

His offspring were still at Orange, so they swam slowly and tired often. If it hadn't been for their mother, he would have abandoned: or probably even devoured: them a long time ago, but it wasn't easy to find females of his species in these waters.

Then again, she was starting to feel like as much of a liability as her spawn. She was only at Yellow, so she wasn't much faster than them, yet still required a lot of his food. Even mating with her had grown… inconvenient due to the size difference.

He had considered getting rid of them and starting over, but finding a Green female would be even harder than waiting for this one to evolve.

So frustrating…

Everything was made even worse by his grumbling stomach.

Something large moved in the distance, catching his attention. It was difficult to make out the details through the water, so he cautiously stuck his head out of the surface to examine it.

It was colossal.

Had it been a living creature, its size would have indicated a grade much higher than his, in which case the only wise move would have been to flee before he got spotted. However, he knew that the object wasn't alive.

He wasn’t sure what exactly it was, but he had seen others like it.

They were fast, tasted horrible, and were typically guarded by small creatures capable of firing strange lights from their limbs. The bite-sized animals were much tastier than the object that housed them, though it was difficult to extract them, and there wasn’t much meat on their bones.

Attacking the giant object for so little food typically wasn’t worth it, unless it happened to break and sink by itself. He had only seen that happen once, though he still vividly remembered that night’s sumptuous feast.

That was when he had discovered the dark secret of the tasty animals: they couldn’t survive long underwater. Once submerged, they seemed to enter a panic, doing everything in their power to resurface. They clearly couldn’t breathe underwater, they were slow and clumsy swimmers, the ocean dulled their senses, and even weakened the strange attacks they fired.

It appeared that he had gotten lucky again. The giant object was sinking slowly, and the creatures had already started jumping off and swimming toward the nearest island.

He had to make sure to get one before the other predators in the area ate them all. He considered swimming to the submerged object to dig out the ones still trapped inside, but he knew that he’d never reach them in time. He was quite far, and there were dozens of powerful creatures much closer. His only hope was to wait in the fleeing creatures’ path, hoping that a couple of them would last long enough to deliver themselves into his maw.

So that was what he did.

His mate and spawn had caught up at some point. They groaned their complaints when he left them behind once more, but he didn’t care. His priority was to fill his belly. Depending on his mood, he might even leave his family some scraps once he was satiated.

To his horror, the tasty creatures got devoured one after the other, making him doubt that any would reach him. There were too many hungry predators around, and the creatures had to swim way too far in the hostile environment.

Most of them got picked off long before they neared him, but a few remained: just enough to rekindle his hopes.

Lurking patiently beneath the surface, he was about to pounce at the closest creature the moment it passed over him, when another male of his species slammed into him, trying to fight him for his meal.

How dare he?!

The challenger was also a Green, but a smaller and clearly hungrier one. Who had given him the guts to try?!

Biting back, he easily tore out his rival's throat, spitting it into the depths. He wouldn't have turned down the nourishing meat on any other day, nor would he have ignored a Green core. However, there was no need to fill up on the foul taste of his own kin when he could experience the unique flavour of the small creatures.

Shifting his attention back to his target, he realized that it was gone, the water where it should have been painted red. Yet another predator had probably ripped it apart.

Who?!

Who was it this time?!

His blood boiled as he searched for the perpetrator. Once again, it was a male of his species, albeit a much younger one. No. Not just one. Three. They had torn the tasty animal into just as many uneven chunks, each greedily munching on a piece.

How dare they?

HOW DARE THEY?!

Lunging at the closest predator, he opened his maw wide before snapping it shut around its torso. The young one was only a fraction of his size, its soft scales and bones not standing a chance against his tempered fangs.

Seeing the young one's severed head spinning in the water, he thought that its now-lifeless eyes looked somewhat familiar, but this was a mystery that he didn't care enough to solve. Moving on to the next little thief, he repeated his actions, adding even more blood to the water. It was only when he was about to slaughter the third that he was interrupted again, this time by a charging female of his species.

This one, he recognized, having swum by her side for a very long time.

His mate wasn't looking at him with her usual fear and reverence. Her eyes were bloodshot as she tried to claw out his heart in blind rage. She had to know that her actions were about to get her killed, but that didn't seem to stop her.

It was only after butchering her and the final younger male that he realized what had happened.

The three smaller predators who had just stolen his meal had been his own spawn. Of course. They had probably caught up to him while he had waited in ambush for the tasty animals, foolishly attacking his prey while he had been distracted by his rival.

Good. They wouldn't be missed. Losing his mate was the only shame, as he would have to go through the trouble of finding another, but she would have never forgiven him for slaughtering her hatchlings.

Lifting his eyes out of the water, he tried to locate the tasty animals again. He had to eat at least one. The giant objects rarely sank, so he might never get another chance to taste the unique flavour of their cores. Unfortunately, there weren't many left, and they had already swum quite close to the island. He would never reach them in time.

Thrashing in frustration, he cursed his rival, his mate, her cursed spawn, and all the other predators who had ruined his perfect meal.

How dare they?!

HOW COULD THEY?!

In his frenzy, he caught a glimpse of the giant object. It was almost completely submerged, though something shifted atop the part sticking out of the water, giving him pause.

There was another tasty animal!

His heart thrummed excitedly as he realized that he might get his meal after all, though he quickly calmed himself down. If it was only a single creature, it would never survive the trip. The other predators would devour it long before it reached him.

Having no choice but to wait and hope for the best, he watched the tasty creature dive into the water.

Scores of predators rushed at it from every direction, only to get brutally slaughtered. He couldn't tell how it had done it, but anything that approached it found itself dead and devoured by scavengers within mere heartbeats.

Realizing that this one was different from the others, his feelings were mixed. Against all odds, it might actually survive the trip to him, but it also wasn't nearly as defenceless as its kin. If he didn't want to end up like the other predators, he had to act cautiously. Swimming ahead of the tasty creature, he maintained a fixed distance while waiting for the others to tire it out.

The tasty creature appeared to slaughter the others by controlling something in the water. He couldn't tell what it was, but it was obvious that it was growing less effective with every kill. Before long, the tasty creature had to strike multiple times to finish even a single Yellow off, its exhaustion making its movements sluggish.

Eventually, it gave up on fighting back, releasing strange bursts of something from its hindlegs to propel itself away from the fangs and claws of its would-be killers.

It was time for him to attack.

Considering how much the tasty creature struggled to escape from even the Yellows and Oranges, it shouldn't be able to resist him. Either way, they were already dangerously close to land. The water was shallow enough for the tasty creature to step on the seabed, so he had to do something before any additional complications emerged.

This had to work.

He'd been denied his feast so many times today: he wasn't about to waste his final chance. Leaping at the tasty animal with his maw wide open, he tried to bite the top half of its tiny body off. He could almost taste its juicy meat rolling along his tongue, and feel its warm blood spilling through the gaps between his fangs.

The moment that he had fought so hard for never arrived, however.

Right as he was about to reach the tasty creature, his vision was replaced by something he didn't understand. An endless expanse of grey stretched in every direction, forming smooth, flat surfaces below, above, ahead, and around him. Each was covered in enormous colourful shapes that pulsed rhythmically.

He tried to turn back, but he couldn't control his body. He couldn't even feel anything below his neck. His head landed gracelessly on something cold and hard, the warmth spilling away from him at a frightening speed. He couldn't even summon the strength to close his maw, his tongue hanging limp to the side, draped over his fangs.

But he remained conscious.

Before he knew it, he was surrounded by creatures standing on two limbs.

Tasty creatures!

Their shapes and sized varied greatly, and none of them looked like the ones from earlier, but he was sure that their flavour was just as good.

He had to eat one.

He HAD to!

It didn’t matter what came afterwards.

He didn’t even care that he didn’t have an afterwards.

He just wanted a bite of their flesh.

Sadly, he had no way of getting what he wanted. The creatures stared at him with a mixture of surprise, confusion, and pity, right as a few colours flashed on the grey surface around and below his head.

His surroundings changed again.

He landed on a stinky pile of rotten meat and excrement, a few broken bones and other objects that he didn’t recognize sticking out of the filth. Everything spun around him as his severed head rolled several times down the sloped surface, coming to rest at the base of the pile.

It was over.

And yet it wasn’t.

He couldn’t do anything: he couldn’t move, feel, nor close his eyes. But he couldn’t even die. He could only stare unblinkingly at what was right in front of him: which wasn’t much.

But he didn’t care.

He didn’t care that he was in this sorry state, nor that he would never swim in familiar waters again. He didn’t even care about his dead family, ripped apart by his own claws and fangs. He wasn’t afraid of dying, nor of staying alive like this.

The only thing that bothered him was that he wouldn't get a bite of the tasty creatures.

Why?!

By the corner of his right eye, he caught sight of a blinking light in the distance. The heaps of filth in this entire area appeared to be slowly moving toward it. He wasn't sure what happened when they reached it, but he imagined that he would find out soon.

He didn't care about that either.

Something shifted inside him. It wasn't his doing: he wasn't capable of doing.

Whatever it was, it spilled out of its mouth and eyes, darkening his vision for the briefest of instants. He grew lightheaded as the little flesh left within and around his skull shrivelled rapidly. Then, he was able to see what exactly had just poured out of his face: a viscous, dark sludge. His previously-perfect vision blurred, as what was left of his consciousness started to slip away.

He might get to die after all…

Recalling that day's events, he was suddenly repulsed by the flavour of his mate and spawn's blood lingering on his tongue. The little ones could get a bit annoying sometimes, but they weren't really that bad. He realized that he actually liked having them around, wishing that he hadn't slaughtered them.

The dark liquid squirmed, transforming into a swarm of tiny critters. They scurried atop the bumpy landscape of rot and excrement, pausing into a short-lived shape.

It was a grin.

It dripped with such malice that he felt glad that he was about to die. Had it really come from inside him?

The last thing he saw was the black critters scattering in every direction: some toward the blinking light, others away from it, while a few burrowed into the filth.

[END OF BOOK 6: CLASH OF THE SEVENTH CIRCLE]

Chapter 702: Goblins

A charred landscape stretched in every direction: burnt tree trunks, half-molten boulders, and dried ponds. A gentle breeze blew from the north, lifting a cloud of ashes, tussling the few loose strands of hair that had escaped Percy's ponytail, and causing the immaculate grey fabric of the robes that he had recently regenerated to ripple.

Despite the soft wind, the Whistling Woods maintained their eerie silence. Some of the trademark pines had survived farther out, but not close enough for Percy to hear their singing cones. Taking one laborious step after the other, he dragged his feet through a knee-deep layer of soot, carving a pair of narrow trenches as he walked.

"It's almost like a different place," he muttered, unable to mask the bitterness in his voice.

"Unrecognizable," the crow perched on his shoulder agreed.

Micky could have chosen any other shape to assume: such as that of a Huehuan, a human, or even the colossal bird that he technically was: yet he'd opted to return to the nostalgic woods as the tiny, almost-mundane creature that he'd been the first time he'd flown here.

Six days had passed since the battle.

House Avalon had buried and mourned their dead: those that they'd been able to dig out of the cinders, at any rate: and moved the living and their belongings to the Guild. The few objects that had been left behind were unimportant enough for Percy's relatives to survive without.

As Percy had predicted, his family had needed several trips to transport everything of value. After seeing them about three-quarters of the distance through the most recent expedition, he had deemed them safe enough to complete the journey without him, returning to the forest with a heavy load lifted off his shoulders.

Following his chats with Elaine and Archibald, he understood that nobody blamed him for the war. He didn't blame himself either: not anymore: though it was undeniable that none of this would have happened if not for him. While he didn't consider himself at fault for exposing Remior's filth, he did consider himself responsible for cleaning it up.

But that was tomorrow's problem. Today, he and his fellow aspect had allowed themselves to take a small break, because there was something that they needed to do.

Estimating that he had roughly reached the centre of the forest, he halted his steps, allowing his Sage's Pond to unfold. Without Micky here, his senses would have stretched about four kilometres in every direction. With him, they had exceeded five, and that was only because the two aspects were standing at the same spot. If they separated, they could probably expand their sensory domain a little farther still.

Scanning every twisted corpse and scorched tree within sight, Percy engraved the images to memory so that he would never forget what his enemies had done, nor what his relatives had lost. The trees would grow back one day, but the deceased wouldn't. Of course, most of the exposed corpses that hadn't been removed from the forest belonged to House Asclepius' mages, but that was beside the point.

Half an hour later, he and Micky felt that they had seen enough. Their enemies were probably rebuilding their strength and trying to master the new spell that they had stolen, so Percy and his fellow aspect couldn't afford to laze around any longer.

Right as they were about to take off, a scrawny creature entered the boundary of their omnidirectional vision, causing Percy to pause. It was short like a human teenager, its wiry frame and sunken cheeks suggesting that it was even hungrier than the poor things usually were.

Percy had been frightened the first time he'd come face-to-face with a wood goblin, the piercing eyes that had gleamed within the dead of night, and fangs that had dripped with saliva having made quite an impression. However, he and Micky had slaughtered enough of them even before leaving for the Alchemists' Guild to never think of them as predators again.

Given how much stronger Percy had grown in recent years, the starving creature now looked as cute and harmless as a stray kitten. Watching the demi-human repeatedly try and fail to dig anything edible out of the ocean of dirt and cinders, he couldn't help but feel a pang of pity.

“Should we help it?” Micky asked, clearly feeling the same way.

Percy nodded. Enveloping himself within his willpower, he lifted his body off the ground, flying toward the creature while keeping his head low. He’d wasted enough time as it was, so he figured that this would be the fastest way to approach the demi-human without alerting it.

Once he was about a kilometre away, he pulled out every morsel of food that he could find in his spatial seal, piling it all on the ground. He made sure that the goblin didn’t see nor hear him, not wanting to spook it. It was close enough that its trained nose should take care of the rest: assuming that the acrid scent of burnt wood didn’t throw it off.

Sure enough, it didn’t even take a full minute for the thin demi-human to catch a whiff of Percy’s sumptuous donation. Percy and Micky pulled away, observing the creature from afar as it rushed to the pile and sank its fangs into a preserved piece of chicken thigh, right before stuffing its face with almonds. It was admittedly an odd assortment of foodstuffs. In his defence, Percy hadn’t expected his snacks to end up in the clawed hands of a goblin when he stored them.

After eating everything it could fit in its stomach and dragging away as much food as it could carry, it headed south: presumably to deliver its loot to its nestmates and request their help to bring home the rest.

“I wonder whether they’ll manage to repopulate,” Micky said, speaking his thoughts out aloud.

“Depends on how many are left,” Percy replied, having not even considered the potential extinction of the demi-humans before.

It was a genuine possibility. The rest of the wildlife should return once the forest recovered, since the species living here existed elsewhere on Remior. The wood goblins, however, were unique to the Whistling Woods. Percy wasn’t sure how many the flames had caught, but the destruction of their habitat and the lack of food might just doom the rest.

With a new burning question in his mind, he decided to stick around and observe the enthusiastic creature a little longer.

“So that’s where they live,” he said once the goblin reached the roots of one of the larger trees in the outskirts of the forest, burrowing into a narrow tunnel that had been concealed by a bush.

“No wonder we never managed to find their hiding spots: they’re underground,” Micky echoed.

Percy and his former familiar had always sparred against the groups scouring the surface of the forest, with the creatures’ underground homes having remained a well-kept secret until today.

Obviously, House Avalon could have easily deployed a powerful Blue like Galahad to track the demi-humans down and eradicate them within a day or two, but there had never been a reason to go that far.

Even Red-borns would typically advance to Orange by fifteen, and any Orange with a common or composite affinity wouldn’t have much trouble defending themselves from the weak humanoids. Percy had only been an exception in his youth because of his inability to use his rare affinity properly.

The goblins weren’t a threat to anybody, so House Avalon and the neighbouring families considered them a mere part of the forest’s fauna: an attraction, even, due to their uniqueness. The poor things also made for decent practice dummies for their young mages, so they had mostly let them be.

Now that Percy had finally caught a glimpse of the demi-humans’ underground home, he couldn’t help his curiosity. Focusing his senses into the hole, he allowed his Sage’s Pond to unfold through the winding tunnels, mapping them out.

The thick layer of dirt and rock separating him from the goblin nest severely restricted the range of his senses, but he still had many ways to figure out what was going on beneath his feet.

His Soul Vision ignored the obstruction entirely, allowing him to easily spot dozens of additional goblins now that he knew where to look. His Mana Sense was hindered more severely by the earthly barrier, though it still fed some additional data into his mind. His regular sight, hearing, and heat vision were entirely useless in this situation, but he already knew what the creatures looked and sounded like, so Ea’s Gift was more than capable of filling the gaps in his vision with the dim light of the caverns, the smooth texture of their damp walls, and the guttural growls of their occupants.

Overall, his Sage's Pond shrank by dozens of times as he forced it to worm its way through the underground complex, but that still spanned enough space to get a decent idea of how the goblins lived.

"Only a third of them are adults," he pointed out with a frown. "They definitely have the numbers to survive, but only if they find a new source of food. Maybe we should have someone deliver supplies every few weeks for the next decade or so, until the forest recovers enough…"

Percy's voice trailed off as he detected some faint mana signatures within the tunnels that didn't belong to the goblins. Every single instance was at Orange, though the mana wasn't neatly concentrated within small spheres, nor was it accompanied by proper souls. It overlapped with a barely-perceptible silver sheen, indicative of a plant's underdeveloped spirituality.

"Interesting. I've no idea what this is, but if it's at Orange, it can potentially be used as the main ingredient in a potion," Micky: who had clearly also spotted the mysterious plant: pointed out.

Whatever it was, there was a lot of it underground, and Percy was sure that he had never seen anything like it on the surface of the forest.

Wishing to examine the ingredient from up close without scaring the goblins out of their nest, he searched for a spot that wasn't too deep, and where the strange plant was concentrated but the demi-humans weren't. Using his domain, he scooped out a huge cube of dirt and rock, surgically removing the ingredient before returning the block into the hole.

The mysterious plant was some type of moss that appeared to grow along the walls of the cavern. In Percy's regular vision, it sported a bright, yellowish-white colour that was indicative of a light affinity. That much wasn't too strange or interesting by itself. What surprised Percy the most was how closely the moss resembled the glowing eyes of the goblins themselves.

"Do you think it's a coincidence that we found the green and red mushrooms growing out of the trolls' corpses, and now this moss within the goblins' den? And that both tribes of demi-humans seemed to actively consume and use the ingredients?" Micky asked.

"I'm gonna say no," Percy replied.

Realizing how poorly they understood semi-sapients despite the few times that they had interacted with them, Percy and Micky agreed to spend another hour collecting samples to experiment with later, before leaving for the Fungal Spire.

Chapter 703: House Oratio

Nesha was sitting quietly next to her boss as the latter negotiated with the patriarch of House Oratio, who was in turn surrounded by two of his subordinates: both at Blue. Nesha was ready to answer any questions that the Veiled Lady might have, or interject in case the woman made a mistake, though they had already discussed their line of argument at length and agreed on their strategy, so it was unlikely to be necessary.

They were currently in Semjana's office, her maids having served the powerful mages tea and refreshments that nobody had touched yet. The Veiled Lady repeatedly thrummed her midnight blue nails on the wooden desk, patiently waiting for the Violet to consider her offer. Every now and then, she paused to straighten the creases on her black dress.

"Lady Semjana, I'm afraid that your prices are simply outrageous," the patriarch said, not bothering to hide his displeasure.

Some might consider his reaction relatively polite, given the difference in strength and status. House Oratio wasn't necessarily a superior force to the entire Black and White Syndicate, but the Blue in charge of a single district couldn't be compared to the leader of any noble family, let alone one affiliated with a Great House. The fact that the patriarch had travelled all this way: temporarily leaving his province without a Violet: to negotiate with Lady Semjana in person only proved how desperate he was.

The man had gained some weight around the waist since the last time Nesha saw him, the buttons near the bottom of his shirt looking like they were about to pop. Other than that, he had remained mostly unchanged. His short black hair was of the same shade as her own, which irritated her to no end. It couldn't be helped. Their families were distantly related, which only made the bastard's betrayal even more difficult to swallow.

Catching herself glaring at the Violet icily, Nesha averted her gaze. She'd worked too hard… prepared too much… pulled too many strings to create this opportunity, just to waste everything by losing control of her emotions. Thankfully, the patriarch was too engrossed in the conversation to notice, though one of the Blues was giving her a nasty look. Hopefully, he would think that she had simply found the Violet's words offensive.

Nesha had asked Lady Semjana for permission to also wear a veil in the meeting, since she couldn't risk the patriarch recognizing her too early. Technically, only the Veiled Ladies were allowed to wear them in Twilight City, but nobody besides her boss, the Violet, and his two subordinates would see Nesha like this. She doubted that the mages of House Oratio were familiar enough with the Syndicate's rules to notice that something was off, plus none of this would matter about an hour later.

Either way, her boss had agreed without even questioning her reason, treating her like a daughter by now.

'I'm sorry, Lady Semjana. I'm about to cause some trouble, but I swear I'll make it up to you.'

"Eighteen gold coins per person, per day?! We've never had to spend more than three to cleanse our cores!" the Violet reiterated, oblivious to Nesha's thoughts.

The Veiled Lady shook her head, clearly unwilling to budge. "Lord Oratio, I assure you that the price is more than fair. You can't compare the Aurora Dew to the regular elixirs that you're used to. Not only does a mage need to consume thrice as much to see the desired results, you also have to account for the losses in production. The average alchemist is unable to retain even half of the ingredients, so a sixfold increase in cost is the bare minimum. There's still our profit margin to consider. The only reason we're not asking for more, is because the price of regular elixirs has gone down slightly in recent years. If you don't want to pay it, you can always buy directly from the Guild."

The patriarch gritted his teeth, swallowing whatever he was about to say. Everyone in the meeting knew that this wasn't an option for House Oratio. As a vassal family of House Asclepius, they had officially been banned from trading with the alchemists.

Nesha tuned most of the conversation out, paying just enough attention to be able to answer if Semjana asked her something. She wasn't too interested in whatever her boss and the patriarch agreed to, since she didn't expect the terms of their deal to ever materialize.

While Nesha had been the one to suggest that Semjana sold elixirs to Machaon, so that she could gather some intel on the White's movements, House Oratio had no place in that arrangement. Nesha had gone through the lengths that she had to drag the bastards here for a different reason.

“I’m glad that we were able to come to an understanding, Lord Oratio…” the Veiled Lady said after some back and forth, narrowing her eyes. “Before we shake on it, there’s one final thing that I have to ask: what is your family’s current relationship with House Asclepius? Please forgive my bluntness, but as a representative of the Syndicate, I need to at least know what I’m getting into.”

The patriarch’s features twisted into a grimace as a clearly unpleasant topic was brought up, though he forced his expression back into shape the following second. “Non-existent,” he said. “I was shocked and appalled by what Lord Asclepius did, so I immediately gave the order to cut all ties with him.”

‘A lie.’ Nesha didn’t even need her bloodline to tell her that. The snake had always been too much of a coward to even consider standing up to the Great House.

Now that Machaon had openly admitted to stealing the egg from the hive, House Oratio had no choice but offer the proper lip service officially, though Nesha didn’t doubt for a second that the Violet had been given explicit permission from the White to say what he had to, in order to get Aurora Dew for his family.

What gave Nesha the urge to chuckle was how squeamish Lady Semjana still was about potentially getting on Percy’s bad side. Nesha wanted to reassure the poor woman that her boyfriend wouldn’t care about something this minor. Hell, she had already discussed her plans with him and Micky and received their agreement. Unfortunately, she couldn’t say that without revealing her identity.

As soon as the Veiled Lady heard what she wanted from the noble, she assured him that she was going to have the paperwork sent to him by the end of the month, so that they could put everything in writing. Happy with that arrangement, the mages of House Oratio left, after which Nesha also excused herself to rush after them. Catching a glimpse of their shrinking backs, she confirmed which gate they were likely planning to exit the city from.

Going the opposite way to avoid being spotted, she circled around several blocks, taking one deep breath after the other to activate her boosting arts. It was the middle of the day, so the pristine white streets and buildings of the 45th district were buzzing with activity. It was arguably a bad place to use the Dance, though she didn’t have a choice. She needed the power of the Masterful spell to overtake her targets and prepare her traps.

Hoping that the concealment runes on her equipment would hide the most important details and that the passersby would be too taken aback and have too little time to examine her properly, she sprinted toward the gate she had singled out earlier.

Countless black orbs popped into and out of existence around her, shrinking and growing randomly. To an outsider, they might have looked like isolated pockets of ambient and space mana, but she knew that they were actually connected to the dark loops visible on her skin to form a giant circuit.

A faint metallic sheen coated her body from head to toe, thin enough that it didn't inhibit her movements in any way. It helped her draw and accumulate earth and metal mana from the air, while the indigo bolts of electricity shrouding her did the same for lightning.

The electricity incinerated her clothes almost immediately, revealing her face and the tight-fitting chainmail that covered her entire body from the neck down. Its tiny links were made of a dark alloy: the very material that she had personally invented.

Space itself stretched and twisted around her as she moved, causing her figure to bend in odd ways and each of her strides to cross dozens of metres. It hopefully blurred her features enough to make it even harder for anyone to recognize her from the forgotten wanted posters, but Nesha was under no illusion that she would be able to keep her fake identity after today.

The city's authorities would undoubtedly be alerted about the weird spatial mage doing even weirder things within minutes, and a thorough investigation would seal her fate by sunset.

It didn't matter.

She just had to reach her destination before her targets, prepare her traps, do what she had to do, and get the hell out of here.

Chapter 704: Uncle Jeen

The good news was that Nesha's affinity allowed her to cover a lot of ground extremely quickly: especially when she went all out like this. Leaping over the eastern border of the city, she was confident that she had overtaken the three nobles despite their head-start and her detour.

Glancing at the large metallic gate to her right and the footpath that the Violet and his subordinates would hopefully follow out of the city, she oriented herself, recalling where she had buried the nearest

batch of magical constructs. She kept heading straight for a couple hundred metres, stopping behind a small hill that the road slightly curved around.

Using her earth affinity, she shifted the dirt beneath her feet, feeling for the location of the enchanted slabs. Once she found them, she began slowly moving them directly beneath the path.

Obviously, this wasn't the only set of traps that she had prepared.

Twilight City was massive, and Nesha hadn't known which gate the patriarch would have entered from, which had left her with no choice but to plant hundreds of constructs at as many as fifteen different locations.

As if the sheer redundancy of her arrangements wasn't annoying enough, Nesha hadn't been able to bury the engraved objects too close to the paths, since other people traversed them all the time. Having the traps right next to the road would have risked somebody with keen senses stumbling upon them by accident, ruining her preparations and potentially compromising her safety.

Fifty or so metres away had been the closest she had been willing to plant the constructs, meaning that her plan heavily hinged on her arriving at the correct location earlier than her targets and taking a few minutes to move the objects closer.

Between the sheer number of enchanted slabs that she had spread around Twilight City, the time, effort, and risk in maintaining them for weeks without anybody noticing, and finally the short window that she had to act right now, she had been forced to severely restrict the scope of her traps.

'It'll have to do,' she thought, wiping the sweat off her forehead as she hid behind the hill.

She'd only displaced about eighty percent of the constructs, but it had already taken way too long. Assuming that the nobles hadn't decided to exit through a different gate at the last minute, they should be arriving soon.

Nesha crouched and walked another hundred or so metres away from the path, spying on it from within the tall grass. While her enemies were unlikely to scan the dirt several metres below the surface with their domains, there was a good chance that they would notice her if she remained closer.

Only when she spotted three silhouettes strolling leisurely along the dirt path did she halt her steps and hold her breath to avoid alerting them. She couldn't examine the newcomers properly due to the distance and her current vantage point, but their numbers and timing suggested that it was probably her targets.

They were currently too far away for even their footsteps to be heard, so the only sounds that reached Nesha's ears were the chirping crickets of the surrounding fields and her own racing heartbeat.

Perhaps she should have waited for Micky or Percy to help her with this. Dispatching a Violet and a couple of Blues would have been effortless for them. The problem was that her boyfriend and his fellow aspect had had to rush to the Camelot province the day before. It had taken months of back and forth to get the nobles of House Oratio here, and Nesha had no idea when she'd get another chance to ambush them.

'It's fine. They're just a bunch of weaklings with little combat experience, if any, used to hiding within Machaon's shadow. It's why he didn't even bother including their House in his army. Either way, this is something I need to do on my own…'

Nesha wasn't above receiving help from Percy for something that she couldn't do alone. For example, she knew that she wouldn't be able to bring down House Asclepius by herself, but a little House Oratio? That should be well within her ability to handle.

Unfortunately, a complication emerged just as the nobles neared the location of her traps.

One of them said something that Nesha was too far away to hear, prompting the others to nod. Then, the same person who had spoken took off to the sky, his companions releasing bursts of fire and air mana: respectively: from their feet to follow.

Nesha gritted her teeth. While this confirmed that the trio had to be the Violet and Blues of House Oratio, she knew that she wouldn't be able to catch them by surprise like this.

This was a possibility that she had obviously considered: she'd have been a fool not to: yet part of her had hoped that her targets would have stuck to the ground for a while longer. Although flying wasn't prohibited inside Twilight City, visitors generally avoided it out of respect toward the Syndicate. The

nobles walking out of the gate had thus been a relatively safe bet, with the rest of the distance to the traps having been up to Nesha's luck: or the lack thereof, evidently.

She sighed, pushing her boosting art to the limit and reaching into the mana contained within the slabs to pull them out of the ground.

Her enemies spotted her instantly, jerking their heads toward her, right as dozens of metallic slabs made of the same dark material as her armour pierced through the dirt and shot toward them.

The mages of House Oratio easily blocked most of the projectiles with their domains, not even bothering to use their mana, though Nesha caused a few of the objects to circle around the nobles, trying to box them in.

When the closest constructs were about fifty metres from the three men, she willed the enchantments to activate, causing the air and light around them to twist into a chaotic tapestry of colours. She would have preferred to get them even closer first, but she knew that her opponents would destroy them long before that happened.

The spatial distortion cleared up a couple of seconds later, revealing the enemy nobles alive and well, without so much as a crease on their robes.

Nesha clenched her fists hard enough to drain them of all colour.

This result hadn't exactly been unexpected, but it was still somewhat disappointing. After practicing affinity fusion and magiscript relentlessly over the past decade, on top of promoting her second core to Green and mastering her boosting arts, Nesha had grown several times stronger since her last fight.

Even though she hadn't been able to prepare as many constructs as she would have liked in each location, nor get them close enough to her opponents before activating them, she had still packed a lot more power into the objects than what she had used in the Thirsty Valley to slaughter several Greens.

The problem was that her opponents this time weren't Greens.

“I would have commended you for the effort, but this was honestly quite pathetic,” the Violet said in a relaxed tone as he and his subordinates flew closer to Nesha. “Is it too much to ask that you tell us who sent you before you die?” he asked as he landed about twenty metres away.

Nesha frowned. Her face wasn’t even concealed any more, since she had gotten rid of the veil before leaving the city. “You still haven’t recognized me, Uncle Jeen?”

The man furrowed his brow, probably having not expected to be addressed in such a familiar manner. He tossed her an appraising look that lasted for several seconds before his eyes finally widened in recognition. “Little Nesha? You’re still alive?”

“Sorry to disappoint,” she spat.

“Nonsense!” the man said, speaking in an ecstatic manner as he wore the warmest smile that his greasy face was capable of producing. “You can’t imagine how many sleepless nights I’ve spent worrying about your safety. Why don’t you come back with us to our mansion? We’ll clean you up and plead with Lord Asclepius and the Divine Root to pardon your crimes. I’ll even pretend that your misguided attempt to assassinate me just now was merely a prank from my confused and grieving niece.”

“Do us both a favour and cut the crap, will you?” Nesha said, her eyes narrowing. “I was young when you burnt my House to the ground and butchered my family, not stupid. I can’t even imagine being able to sleep after what you’ve done. My father thought of you like a brother before you stabbed him in the back. If you want to sell me to Machaon, you’ll have to settle for a corpse.”

Machaon had been the one behind the destruction of her family, but it was House Oratio that had carried out the orders. They hadn’t necessarily been more powerful than House Veritas, but it was difficult to defend against a betrayal that nobody saw coming.

Jeen’s fake smile crumbled away like a broken vase as he realized that his honeyed words weren’t fooling anybody. Gesturing at his subordinates to surround Nesha, the three nobles tried to incapacitate her with their domains.

Unfortunately for them, Nesha possessed a domain of her own.

With two Green cores and four versions of the Dance active, she was technically closer to Blue than any Green on Remior, including Percy. While she wasn't able to retain her domain without her boosting art, she was more than capable of wielding it with the spell active.

Of course, Nesha's domain was only about as powerful as a Blue's. It couldn't possibly overpower the willpower of a Violet and both of his subordinates at the same time, yet it still allowed her to resist their joint pressure just enough to move.

A giant fireball, a sharp gale of wind, and a boulder large enough to crush both of the other spells closed in on her, colliding into an apocalyptic blend of elemental mana as she slipped away through space.

Not letting up, the powerful nobles kept firing one spell after the other, taking full advantage of their numbers and higher grades to bully Nesha around. Her body stretched and twisted into unrecognizable shapes as she danced away from the deadly spells, dodging the hostile mana by the skin of her teeth.

It wasn't just space that bent to assist her. The ground did as well, bouncing up and down like a trampoline to propel her away from the attacks, the electricity in the air pulling at her metallic coat to accelerate her further. Nesha's movements rolled gracefully into one another as her body and her four affinities worked in perfect harmony.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Synchronization: Refined + Elastic Ground: Refined + Dance of the Savage Gods: Masterful + Twisted Ballet: Masterful + Magnetic Coat - Masterful -> Ballet of the Savage Gods: Masterful!]

Chapter 705: Ballet

Nesha wasn't very surprised by the notification, as the spell had been close to completion for months, missing only the external pressure for everything to click together.

Unlike Percy's Carnival or Micky's Symbel of the Savage Gods, her personalized version of the boosting art was a purely defensive one. It focused exclusively on mobility, leveraging traits of all her affinities to keep her away from harm.

She hadn't seen any need to include offensive spells into the technique, since her offensive capabilities rested mainly within her traps and strategizing. So long as her boosting art kept her alive for a while, she should be able to find an opening to kill her opponents.

In theory, at least.

This wasn't the kind of battle where Nesha could find an opening. She wanted to fire back at the enemy nobles: at the bastard who had ruined her life: but she had her hands full just surviving the onslaught of magic coming at her from every direction. Her willpower was spent just loosening the space around her so that she could keep dodging, and every drop of mana that her boosting art produced was used to travel through the air in ways that no other affinity would have allowed.

Every now and then, she tried to unleash a flock of deadly butterflies at her opponents, but the insidious constructs never made it close enough to threaten them before being ground down into harmless motes of mana.

Worse still, Nesha's defences weren't perfect.

While she just about managed to avoid any direct hits, some of the spells exploded close enough for the resulting shockwaves to slam into her violently, the enchantments on her chainmail struggling to absorb the impacts. Every blow she received shattered several links, peeling away entire segments of her armour and bruising her body.

Nesha was more than capable of fighting a single grade above her own. Even three or four Blues might not be able to beat her, but a Violet was pushing it: whether or not it was a relative weakling like Jeen. The addition of his subordinates was icing on the cake.

She wasn't Percy.

The most she could do in a battle like this was to survive. To delay the inevitable. This was why she'd known from the moment she'd decided to lure the patriarch of House Oratio to Twilight City that she'd have to cheat to take him down.

Several minutes and a hundred times as many spells later, Nesha was almost naked, her body beaten black and blue and forcibly stripped of the armour that she had spent years painstakingly crafting. Her chest rose up and down with each strained breath, her lungs causing her to wince in agony every time they pressed against her cracked ribs.

Still, she had to keep the corners of her lips from curling up. ‘This should be about enough.’

Catching a glimpse of her opponents, she couldn’t help but frown in disgust upon noticing that Jeen and his goons were out of breath. The pigs hadn’t even moved a muscle throughout the battle. They’d just stood rooted at the same spots, firing spell after spell at her. Nesha hadn’t known that it was even possible for a Violet to tire that easily.

Occasionally, a fiery explosion illuminated the patriarch’s face, revealing a smirk that would have looked a lot more ominous if it wasn’t fragmented by his constant panting. The bastard was enjoying this, probably elated that he was about to tie a major loose end: in his mind at least.

She poured every drop of mana into her movement spell to stretch herself away to safety.

Jumping backwards, she crossed over a hundred metres in an instant, yet that was just the start. Sacrificing her boosting art, she consumed the rest of her reserves to repeat her action a second and a third time, turning into a swirling blob of flesh and black mana that bounced along the stretchy ground, rolling away from the enemy nobles.

Her opponents were caught by surprise, having clearly not realized how easily she could have escaped. They tried to fly after her, but she wasn’t going to allow that. She’d endured too much pain to piece together her final trap. Clicking her fingers, she willed her enchantments to activate once more.

‘Dad… you weren’t always a good father, but you didn’t deserve what happened. This one’s for you.’

Nesha hadn’t known which direction Jeen and his men would enter the city from, which was why she had prepared fifteen different sets of her enchanted slabs. However, creating and hiding enough constructs to threaten even a Violet, multiplied by over a dozen times, while also maintaining them for several months without anyone noticing would have been impossible.

This was why she had kept the buried constructs relatively simple, weak, and less numerous than what was necessary, treating them as mere distractions. It would have been nice if they could have brought down one of the Blues, to make the subsequent battle easier, but the primary purpose of the fake traps had been to put her opponents at ease: to make them think that her ambush had already failed.

The real trap had to be mobile enough that she could carry it into battle and set it up during a tough fight. Inconspicuous enough that nobody would see it coming. Powerful enough that even a Violet wouldn't be able to stop it. Something that she would only need one of, wouldn't be at risk of being discovered or stolen before the battle, and that she could easily maintain wherever and whenever she was.

It had always been on her very person.

Countless stability runes collapsed at the same time, twisting the space around them. These enchantments hadn't been carved onto bulky slabs of dimensional alloy. The runes were a hundred times more numerous, and dozens of times more compact, since they were located within each of the links that comprised her broken chainmail.

Unlike Percy's armour, the primary function of Nesha's chainmail hadn't been to protect her.

Every piece was as small as a grain of rice, yet contained about ten cubic metres of compressed space: making it as spacious as ten of Remior's spatial amulets! And there were thousands of broken links currently scattered around the nobles.

Even with the Vault's superior runecrafting language and fused mana that was extremely compatible with the enchantments, Nesha had spent hours manually compressing and stabilizing each individual patch of space, dripping with sweat whenever she'd finished one.

And she'd done this over and over, spending most of her free time over the past couple of years. The links weren't even usable as normal storage devices: the space locked within them was too dense and rough to contain anything without ripping it to shreds.

It had taken all of Nesha's knowledge and ability to simply keep the runes from exploding in her face before she was ready: she'd had to compartmentalize the pockets of space so that they would remain compressed even when the links shattered into several smaller pieces.

Even Percy's trick of using controlled self-repair enchantments to copy the magical links hadn't been an option, since the dimensional alloy contained patches of actual space that she had ripped out of her

surroundings: not just mana. Suffice to say, repairing or recycling the equipment was out of the question.

The attack could only be unleashed once.

Afterwards, Nesha would have to spend several more years reforging the armour from scratch if she wanted to use it again. Instead of a chainmail, it might be more appropriate to call this a bomb. She had created the most powerful explosive device that Remior had ever seen, worn it to battle, and tricked her opponents into peeling it away from her to surround themselves with its dormant pieces.

And now the bomb had gone off.

Countless tiny explosions connected in an instant, expanding into an enormous black sphere over a hundred metres across, with no sign of slowing down. It swallowed the three nobles without even giving them the chance to react before continuing to grow toward Nesha.

She tried to slip away once more, only to remember that she didn't have any mana left.

Out of options, she closed her eyes, at peace with whatever her fate might be. She didn't care that years of hard work had just gone up in darkness, nor did she care about the pain she was in. She muttered a silent prayer to Phoebe, not for her own survival, but for the demise of her opponents. It wasn't like she wanted to die, but she'd happily embrace death if it meant dragging that snake down with her.

But she didn't die. The notification was what alerted her to that fact.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Dimensional Regalia: Refined + Spatial Devastation: Refined -> Husk of Devastation: Masterful!]

'Two big upgrades in one battle. I bet even Percy hasn't had that happen to him before,' she thought, finding this amusing.

It only went to show how much planning she'd put into this. Back in the Alchemists' Guild, Nesha had never thought that she would obtain justice for her destroyed family with her own two hands. Her plan

had originally been to save up enough money and hire somebody else to do the dirty work. Later, she had hoped that Percy would be the one to do this for her. But her boyfriend had done something even better: he'd given her the means and set her on the path to succeed by herself.

Opening her eyes, she realized that the blast had stopped a couple dozen metres away. There was no corpse, nor any other trace of the enemy nobles or the battle they had fought.

Nothing besides a colossal crater shaped like a perfect hemisphere. It was about two hundred metres deep and twice as wide. There was no smoke emanating from it, nor rubble littering its base: just a smooth slope: almost as if a giant had simply scooped out a piece of Remior with a spoon.

She couldn't hear anything but a loud ringing, the sides of her head and neck slick with warm blood. She guessed that her eardrums had ruptured entirely, meaning that it would probably take a skilled healer to mend them.

'It's fine. I'll look for somebody at my destination,' she thought.

Glancing at the city, she spotted tiny dots flying towards her: the Syndicate's Veiled Ladies and Radiant Lords, most likely. The commotion that Nesha had created while speeding through the alternating districts had clearly alerted the pursuing mages to her existence, while the devastation that she had just unleashed had finally pointed them in the right direction.

It didn't matter.

She didn't think that there was any Blue on Remior that could catch her, so unless the Syndicate had recently added Violets to their ranks without anybody hearing about it, she felt confident in escaping even in her exhausted state.

Taking one deep breath after the other, she began walking toward the nearest backup stash, about fifty metres away from her current location. Her reserves were half full by the time she reached it.

Unearthing a spatial amulet, she guzzled down four vials of Blue healing potion, and just as many Blue magic potions that Micky had left for her. The former rapidly relieved some of the soreness in her body,

lifting her fatigue, while the latter worked alongside her boosting art to accelerate her mana regeneration.

Picking the final object from the stash, she draped it over her battered body, right as four sets of glowing tattoos lit up across her skin. It was a simple linen dress: just so that she wouldn't run around the continent naked.

The pursuing Blues were already two hundred metres away, the men wearing elegant white suits while the women wore dark veils and long black dresses. Nesha began bouncing away toward the Fungal Spire: where nobody on Remior would dare to touch her.

The Blues kept gaining ground on her for a couple of seconds, until the rest of the Dance: or rather, the Ballet now: activated, after which there was simply no catching her.

Her time in Twilight City was finally over.

Her prolonged stay had allowed her to keep her head low and practice her magic without dragging Percy and Micky down. It had also allowed her to eliminate the bastard who had stabbed her father in the back, uncover the identity of the bigger bastard who had set him up to the task, and even do her part in acquiring information and valuable relationships that would aid her and Percy in the fight against House Asclepius.

Some of those relationships might not survive the revelation of her true identity or her escape from the city, but Nesha was confident that most would. She had been careful to only pick trustworthy people to work with. If any of them chose to cut all ties with her over this, they'd only be doing her a favour.

Thinking that she was going to reunite with her boyfriend at last, she grinned.

Chapter 706: Unique approach

'Pay attention to the background. The trees are starting to grow blurry,' Nephthys warned.

Releasing a weak pulse of willpower, the clone cleared out the motes of mana dancing playfully in front of his host's compound eyes, so that he could observe his handiwork more easily. His canvas was a

shallow but wide puddle of water mana of his own creation, with several blobs of acid mana floating within it.

The two humans: a couple holding hands as they strolled through the woods: as well as everything else in the picture sported a deep purple hue that distinguished them from the colourless water.

Focusing on the trees near the top of the image, Percy moved some of the charge from certain sections, concentrating it on others. The spots which had the lightning mana removed reverted to regular water, losing most of their colour, while those that had energy added grew more pronounced.

A few seconds later, he managed to fix the background inside the acidic painting, though he had inadvertently lost control of the mana comprising the protagonists in the process. The couple dispersed into a chaotic mesh of purple diluted in the water, ruining the whole thing. Salvaging the art piece wasn't impossible, but the effort required to pull everything back into place would be the same as starting over.

The clone mentally sighed, letting go of his mana entirely. He'd been at this for hours already, so he was too tired to continue. It might be better to move on to the next exercise: hopefully one that would strain a different cognitive muscle.

'It was a good attempt. You're getting better,' the reincarnated goddess consoled him.

He nodded, taking a brief stroll around the cavern to unwind before resuming his work. Nephthys and her mother now lived in different rooms, for multiple reasons. The Ruby Empress had been around the former deity for around a decade already, so she trusted her enough with both her own survival and the future of her species to let her out of her sight.

Furthermore, the royal wasps had both grown too large to keep sharing their living quarters. Originally, there hadn't even been a cavern large enough for a White wasp inside the hive, since no past Queen had dared to advance to that grade before.

Thankfully, the creature had planned for her evolution a while ago, ordering her subjects to carve out a chamber large enough to contain her, complete with wide tunnels connecting it to other key areas around the hive. The previous room had been passed on to her daughter, along with many of the former ruler's responsibilities.

Nephthys was still not ready to inherit the entire underground kingdom: Starry Princesses typically had to wait until at least Blue for that, though it was also apparently common for a previous Queen to live out her lifespan and not abdicate her throne until her daughter was well into Violet.

Trusting a Green heir with the hive generally wasn't a good idea. At the end of the day, Starry Wasps were just beasts, so their intelligence was heavily correlated with their grade. However, Nephthys was an exception, since she had retained her sapience from her previous life and was more than capable of fulfilling parts of her future role already.

At the height of her power, Nephthys had ruled over an entire planet, so it would be silly if she couldn't handle a few bugs. Her main limitations were that her body was still too immature for her to lay eggs or exert her mental influence on too many wasps at the same time, though her Charged Antennae mutation helped greatly with the latter.

Had Machaon attacked the Fungal Spire, the reincarnated goddess might have participated in the battle, since she was also strong enough to hold her own against a couple of Blues. Unfortunately, flying to the Camelot province in time had been out of the question, so the wasp and the clone possessing her had resigned themselves to holding the fort until the return of the Empress.

'Try repeated fission and fusion next,' Nephthys suggested, officially declaring the end of Percy's short break.

Reaching into the wasp's second core, he split the acid mana into its components, gathering half into a hemispherical reservoir of water and the rest into dense lightning. He pushed the two affinities into the corresponding channels, circulating the mana once around the bug's body before recombining the two streams inside her abdomen. Splitting them again, he started over.

It was a simple exercise, with the caveat being that he wasn't supposed to draw ambient mana from the outside to replenish his host's reserves. The natural form of affinity fusion and fission that occurred within a composite core was among the most efficient forms of mana conversion in existence. It was significantly more efficient than even converting pure mana into other elements or claiming ownership of ambient mana through a breathing technique, since a lot of it was handled automatically by the concepts swirling inside the organ.

Still, it wasn't perfect. Some losses were inevitable.

The goal of the exercise was for Percy to help the process along, retaining as much of the mana as possible between one cycle and the next. The task would be over when he consumed three-quarters of the wasp's reserves, at which point he would count how many times he had managed to circulate it around her body before whittling it down. The more, the better.

It was a shorter and less strenuous exercise than the previous one, so he often treated it as a break to allow his mind to relax. That said, its usefulness couldn't be overstated for somebody who relied on their boosting art as much as Percy did.

'You made it last for two thousand, three hundred and forty-six revolutions,' Nephthys said about fifteen minutes later. 'That's thirty more than last week.'

'Still much lower than you though,' Percy pointed out. 'Didn't you reach three thousand recently?'

'That's not a fair comparison. I've been playing with these affinities for about a decade already, while you've only been at it for a fraction of that time.'

Percy knew that she was right, but it was in his nature to always strive for more. When he had first started possessing his familiar, his progress had been much faster. His experience with other affinities, the endless inspiration afforded to him by the wasp's Divine Spark mutation, and the guidance from the ancient being who was paving the way for him had all contributed to that. Unfortunately, everything had started to slow down after the first year, making it difficult to keep up with Nephthys.

Perhaps, that was the difference between a mortal and somebody who had experienced the Concept realm before. Deities in the Elemental Acquisition stage typically had to spend hundreds of thousands of years to branch out to new affinities, but that was because they didn't have the benefit of possessing a mana core with the correct element.

Through a strange set of coincidences, Nephthys had received the best of both worlds: the experience and inspiration of a goddess, coupled with the core of a mortal.

It also didn't help that her approach to magic was entirely different from Percy's. The Ruby Princess didn't seem to care about creating bigger or more destructive spells, her attention being solely on

deepening her understanding of her affinities and comprehending the underlying concepts related to them.

Percy wasn't sure whether this was something that she had always done: even as a mortal: or whether it was her experience as a former goddess that had informed this approach.

Percy had too many enemies to stop thinking about fighting entirely, but he wasn't arrogant enough to disregard the methods and guidance of somebody who had reached the peak of the Self-Discovery stage before, even if she had done that with a different element.

'How about practicing your lightning control next?' she asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Refilling his host's second core, Percy separated the acid mana into its two components again, though he ignored water for now. Pulling the indigo mana to his borrowed antennae, he fired a jolt of electricity into the nearest corridor, striking a green protruding crystal that they'd agreed to treat as the first target.

Hitting the first mark was simple enough, but that was just the start. The electric arc connected to a second target deeper in: a red mineral this time: followed by a third and a fourth. Due to the curvature of the tunnel, Percy swiftly lost sight of the projectile, but his Sage's Pond allowed him to continue aiming at distant targets, located far beyond the reach of the typical Green mage.

The problem was that his control weakened rapidly over that distance. While he could keep track of the spell even a couple of kilometres away, his ability to manipulate it was limited to about a fifth of that range. Lightning also happened to be among the unruliest common elements, so keeping the arcs straight wasn't easy.

By the tenth target, Percy's accuracy noticeably dropped, causing him to accidentally scorch the minerals surrounding the targets. The repeated hits also stretched the indigo bolt thinner and thinner, exhausting its power by the fifteenth target.

Letting the spell disperse, Percy started over with a fresh stream of lightning mana, trying to zap more targets and do so more accurately.

All things considered, he felt that Nephthys' approach was a bit of a mixed bag. The exercises that she had shown him varied greatly, covering every aspect of her three elemental affinities: though she admittedly had no idea how to do anything with beast mana that she and Percy didn't already know about.

In some ways, Percy wasn't sure that this was an effective way to train. He felt pitifully weak: if not in an absolute sense, then certainly in relation to the amount of time that he had poured into this project. Learning to convert mana more efficiently, fire lightning bolts from farther away, or control intricate shapes of acid and water sounded good in theory, but it was debatable which of these skills would find a use in combat.

In other ways, Percy felt that his mastery of the new mana types was deeper than even his own, despite having only trained under his familiar for a negligible amount of time. There were certain aspects of his soul and pure magic that he had never even thought of measuring, let alone working to improve.

For example, Percy wasn't sure what the range of his scythes were. How far from his body could they travel before he lost the ability to control them?

Using the Carnival, he was used to circulating phantom mana through both of his cores, but how efficient was that exactly? It was an unstable form of affinity fusion, so it should be lower than what he could do in Nephthys' body, but how many revolutions would that translate to?

Over the years, Percy had always prioritized the next "big thing", constantly thinking about the fastest way to grow his fighting strength or achieve his goals. He'd never had time to study every facet of his magic as thoroughly as Nephthys did.

Considering his results, he wasn't even convinced that his own approach was wrong. Why bother optimizing less important aspects of his spells when he seemed to have a knack for choosing the most useful area to focus on?

The fact that Percy had invented an Extreme spell, defeated mages three grades higher than his own, and figured out how to artificially promote his cores proved that his way of doing things had its own merits.

That said, he had decided to listen to Nephthys while he was borrowing her body. There was certainly much that he could learn from her methods and wisdom, not to mention that this was an excellent opportunity to get to know his familiar better.

'Micky? Do you want to have a go next?' he asked his fellow aspect who was obviously also a part of the clone, yet had remained uncharacteristically silent today.

Percy's training with Nephthys had shown them even the water element in a new light, despite them having previously felt confident in their mastery of it.

'No thanks. I find this type of training too boring. I'm sure it'll help us at some point, but I'd rather let you agonize over it and benefit from our shared memories later,' the Huehuan cheekily replied.

Percy would have rolled his host's eyes, though they were fixed in place. Without anybody to pass the reins to, he began the next exercise: one that involved splitting his water mana into as many distinct blobs as he could handle at the same time, without spilling a single drop to the ground.

Hours stretched into days, but Percy's Insomnia trait allowed him and his host to keep going without stopping, the unchanging environment inside the hive making it difficult to keep track of time. Other than a few breaks here and there: mostly to empty the wasp's jelly glands and cleanse her second core: they took turns going through the exercises, growing a little better with every session.

Eventually, his Status decided that he had done enough for a small reward.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Basic Water Control: Refined!]

Chapter 707: Basic Water Control

Percy's newest spell was an odd one.

He wasn't exactly surprised by the notification, having expected it for weeks. He'd already been aware of the spell's existence due to Nephthys, who had registered three such spells years ago, and even upgraded them to the "Advanced" versions by now.

It also made sense that the water variant of the spell had been the first one he registered, since his experience with Micky had given him a major head-start. The other elements would probably lag behind by another month or two.

Percy had, however, found it strange that Basic Water Control was a Refined spell, back when his familiar had first told him about it. In his mind, the “Basic” spell should have been a Crude one, followed by an “Intermediate” upgrade at Refined, and finally the “Advanced” one being Masterful.

It was only after having spent years personally working on this project that he understood why Phoebe’s Decree had skipped both the Crude tier and the “Intermediate” designation entirely. There was simply no world where such holistic mastery of an affinity could be considered “Crude”.

Leaving what Percy could now do with water mana aside, just the knowledge that he had acquired while going through the exercises was impressive. He knew not only how many separate blobs of water he could maintain at the same time, but even how that number would change as they moved farther away from his body, as he altered their size, or tried to force them into more intricate shapes.

He understood how much water weighed with such specificity, that if he were to lift a large boulder, he could instinctively estimate the exact quantity of water mana that he would need to expel from his body to match it. He was even familiar with obscure properties of the element: such as its thermal capacity: allowing him to accurately guess how much warmer a body of water would grow if it absorbed a certain amount of heat.

This wasn’t information that Percy had deliberately tried to learn: it was just stuff that he had inadvertently burned into his mind through the endless repetition of Nephthys’ exercises. If he were to write it all down, the data would likely fill an entire book.

‘Congratulations!’ the familiar exclaimed, snapping him out of his thoughts. ‘I’m guessing that you’ve finally registered it?’

Nephthys couldn’t see his notifications like his main body could see hers, but his abrupt pause and subsequent silence had clearly clued her in.

He nodded. ‘Thanks. I’m starting to see how this branch of magic can lead to the Concept realm.’

Simply by forcefully applying the properties of the water affinity that he had comprehended to any other mana type, he could imagine turning even fire or lightning into water. Perhaps, this was what it would take to generate an element without the corresponding core. Demigods and true deities had to manually build this skill up over millennia.

This was what a concept was.

Or, well… it might be more accurate to say that this was the prototype of the skeleton of a concept. To fully comprehend the corresponding concept, one would probably have to upgrade the spell beyond the Masterful tier. Despite the newfound depth and breadth of Percy's knowledge in this subject, he had merely scratched the surface of the water affinity.

'I'm not completely sure,' Nephthys admitted. 'I didn't even know that it was possible to acquire additional elements before I met you. Understanding my mind affinity this well was what it took to forge my internal world, so I figured that it should work with anything.'

Percy would have sighed if his host's physiology had allowed it.

No wonder even centuries-old mages like Galahad or Archibald didn't just stumble upon these spells by accident. Developing even the simplest version required years of deliberate effort. Until fairly recently, Percy's relatives hadn't even thought it possible to attain divinity, so they hadn't had a reason to research their affinities in this manner.

Despite her experience and mutation propelling her forward, Nephthys had spent close to a decade to master the Advanced versions of the spells. In hindsight, her progress had been nothing short of shocking, yet she had mentioned that the next step would likely take her several centuries: if not a full millennium.

Percy had figured the Refined spells out quickly enough, but this was a mere taste of what he would need to do in order to become a god. He expected to spend much longer than his familiar to upgrade the spells to Masterful: thirty to fifty years at a minimum.

As for whatever came next? He shuddered just thinking about it. It would easily take him thousands of years, and only if he focused on a single affinity at a time, even with Nephthys and her mutation guiding him.

He couldn't help but pity those who lacked his advantages. Even a Green-born demigod studying their affinity for a hundred thousand years might die of old age before succeeding. Percy had been told several times that most Clear mages failed to attain divinity, but it was only now that he truly understood the reason.

'This explains why Ishkuria's Decree is regarded so highly, why lesser and greater springs like saving their Wiseman's Dust for their elites, and why the peak factions keep fighting over the Elemental Sources,' Micky said.

'Indeed. They clearly need every advantage they can get to complete the spells in time,' Percy agreed.

It was yet another reason to return to Melodia soon. In addition to helping Sol and her people establish their civilization on their war-torn continent and retrieving Zoris from them, Percy wouldn't mind an opportunity to meditate near the Mirror Lake for a few months.

The clone in Nephthys' body couldn't practice with the borrowed soul mana properly, and his main body didn't have access to the inspiration brought about by her mutation, so this might be the only way for him to expedite his progress with a different affinity.

An Elemental Source should be even better for a specific mana type than his familiar's mutation, though Percy doubted that he would be able to register Advanced Soul Control without several years of hard work.

Still, the Basic version of the spell might not be out of his reach in the short-term, and this was something that he would have to do sooner or later anyway. It was debatable how much it would help him in a fight, but it sure wouldn't hurt to have it.

Without any major boosts like his artificial advancements on the horizon, Percy knew that he would have to stack multiple smaller upgrades to keep up with Machaon and the other patriarchs.

Growing his coalition was a given, as was strengthening his allies with the Dance, but matching the top-level combat strength of his enemies would still be quite a challenge. Machaon, Theseus, and Morpheus would eventually upgrade their boosting arts, while Percy, Archibald and the Ruby Empress couldn't grow much stronger in that department.

‘Sending a clone to Melodia is just the start. I’ll need to spend all of my time productively from now on, with both the clones and my main body.’

Percy hadn’t forgotten about the Void Decree still gathering proverbial dust inside his Status, though learning first-hand how difficult mastering a concept was, he suddenly felt quite glad that he hadn’t foolishly activated his third core. Even if the flawed Decree had left him enough of his lifespan to reach the Clear grade, he wasn’t sure that he was willing to sacrifice all the extra time that he might need to study his affinities properly.

To extend his lifespan again and give himself more time for everything, his best option was to return to the Vault or the Void Hand and try to learn the locations of other greater springs that might hold the answers.

Unfortunately, returning to the alliance this soon wasn’t a great idea. Kassorith’s betrayal had probably alerted them to the possibility of intruders, and Percy didn’t know what Zurvanai might have managed to tell them. He’d also decided to postpone his return to the artificial world for a while, to prevent Metatron from realizing how quickly he had advanced from Orange to Green.

‘I suppose I’m going to have to focus mainly on random clones and whatever improvements I can make at home.’

The Basic Elemental Control spells weren’t enough. Percy wasn’t going to stop working on them, but he would need to leverage his familiar’s abilities in other ways to give himself an edge.

His next set of natural promotions was a major milestone that should only be a few decades away, but he wasn’t sure whether his enemies would figure out the Masterful boosting art sooner than that.

The good news was that the clone had already cleared the main body’s lightning and acid channels while the latter had been busy with the artificial advancements. Perhaps, it was time for him and Nephthys to introduce yet another type of training into their busy schedule.

‘Soon. Our main bodies should be back to the Fungal Spire any day now…’

Chapter 708: Master of the mountain

A tall but narrow mountain appeared on the horizon, its peak lost above the veil of clouds. Numerous colossal fungi grew along its steep slopes, their thick stems curving upwards so that their colourful caps were facing the sky. The wide bridges connecting neighbouring mushrooms looked like tiny strings from Percy's current distance, while the bugs and people walking atop the fungi were too small to be seen.

"It's good to be home," Percy muttered without even meaning to, the words simply escaping his lips.

Home. Somewhere along the way, the Fungal Spire had become that.

The first time Percy had reached this place, he'd barely known anything about it. He'd been a powerless teenager, struggling to get a couple of elixirs per day to cleanse his cores. He hadn't even known whether he'd have a future as an alchemist, but he'd had no choice but to try his luck, since nobody had been willing to just give him the necessary resources.

The second time, he'd been a fugitive on the run from every bounty hunter on Remior. He'd been in a race against time to give Nephthys a body before the pyramid housing her soul crumbled away. Worse still, he'd been forced to fight his way through dozens of Blues and even a Violet, nearly losing everything precious to him in the process.

On both occasions, the slender mountain had loomed menacingly on the horizon, promising nothing but strife and uncertainty.

This time was different.

There was still plenty of uncertainty in Percy's future, but all of it was external: it had nothing to do with this place. The Fungal Spire had become his singular safe haven on the entire planet: the one spot where he could relax without fearing for his life.

He was the unofficial master of the mountain, returning to his magical kingdom.

Micky: who had been away from the Guild for the past few years: bobbed his giant head in agreement, nearly throwing Percy off his scalp in the process. The latter had to use his domain to root himself on his friend's plumage, though he didn't bother admonishing him. While the crow wasn't one to shy away

from a prank, Percy knew that Micky hadn't done it on purpose this time: he was still getting used to his new size.

It sure was lucky that the Huehuan had obtained his shapeshifting abilities before reaching Blue. Perhaps they should search for Deimos' remains, which had rotted away somewhere in the very plains currently stretching below them, and thank him for nearly killing them.

'Or maybe not.' Percy shrugged.

Nearing the mountain, he wasn't in a rush to land. He knew that he would probably spend most of the coming days locked inside a claustrophobic cavern or his room in the settlement, so he might as well get some fresh air while he had the chance.

Steering his friend toward the top of the Fungal Spire, he pushed the colourful motes aside with his willpower so that he could scan the top level of the mountain more easily with his Sage's Pond.

The mushrooms there were older, larger, and more vibrant. There weren't as many bridges connecting them, because the Greens and Blues who could survive at this altitude were more than capable of navigating across the mushrooms without them. The ambient mana in the air was denser than it was on the ground, though it still couldn't compare to the depths of the hive.

A few Starry Commanders leisurely grazed atop the fungi, each nearly as massive as Micky. Their dark, glossy carapaces were dotted with colourful lights, making each creature resemble a patch of the night sky. They weren't as numerous as the Starry Soldiers, Workers, or Drones at the lower levels, since there wasn't enough mana to sustain them, nor any reason for their ruler to deploy many outside.

Then again, there wasn't as much movement on the lower levels either, nowadays. The alchemists didn't need to hunt the wasps, since the Ruby Empress voluntarily provided the Guild with enough nectar to drown in.

There were still some insects roaming the mountain and capturing the drifting motes of mana that leaked out of the hive, as well as a few mages who enjoyed hunting the creatures either as a hobby or for combat practice, but the White wasp had better ways to rid her growing empire of its weakest daughters. She could have the stronger wasps cannibalize them, or she could just feed their remains to grow Percy's mushrooms.

The creatures noticed him and Micky approach, though none dared to attack. Percy hadn't communicated with Nephthys to request safe passage, since there was no need.

The Blue bugs acknowledged him with respectful nods, their intelligent eyes gleaming with recognition. How could they not recognize the man who had lived amongst them for a decade already? The person who had granted new life to their dying kingdom, and even gone as far as to personally grant each of them a second mana core?

Banking in a wide arc around the Fungal Spire, Micky circled back toward the settlement at its foot.

The Alchemists' Guild had expanded greatly over the past few years, now sporting an outer ring that surrounded its original walls. The buildings outside were newer but no less impressive, since upgrading the settlement had been one of House Etna's first major projects after acquiring their new runecrafting language.

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Even the inner ring had changed slightly, as the elders had repurposed several buildings into lecture theatres and laboratories. The former had been built to spread Percy's teachings and train new alchemists faster, while the latter were necessary to accommodate the new experts.

Orin had volunteered to oversee the education of the apprentices. Percy had been more than happy to hear that, since his mentor had always been among the most vocal supporters of teaching the next generation of alchemists properly. That was not to say that the previous generation was going anywhere: not with everyone's lifespan having grown by several times!

Flying closer to the ground, Micky glided over the buildings, giving Percy a chance to wave back at the alchemists cheering him on. Suffice to say, he had grown a lot more popular in the Guild after everyone had gotten a proper taste of the positive changes he had brought about.

The mages strolling along the cobblestone streets ranged from Orange to Blue. There was no longer a taboo against low-borns, since even a Red-born alchemist could potentially advance several times and serve the Guild for thousands of years.

Very few people on Remior would even consider bullying somebody for their grade. It was hard to justify it in their minds, considering the kind of monster that had clawed its way up from the very bottom of the Colour realm. That was not to say that there were many Reds on the planet who could follow in Percy's footsteps, but his actions had lifted much of the stigma off of his birth grade.

Of course, there still weren't any Red alchemists in the Guild, albeit for a different reason. Regular elixirs were much easier to get a hold of even for low-born commoners, so most children would advance by their early teens at the latest, and a child under thirteen was way too young to study such a difficult subject.

Ignoring the inner and outer circles of the settlement, Micky approached a certain area just outside the second set of walls. There, Percy spotted a camp containing a few dozen newly-erected stone houses, scattered among ten times as many tents. It was like a small village still in its infancy, attached to the Alchemists' Guild.

The temporary headquarters of House Avalon.

Noble families typically weren't allowed to claim or use land this close to the Guild, but the six elders had made an exception for Percy's family due to their dire circumstances. Even if the old alchemists hadn't been immensely grateful to him for elevating the Guild to new heights, they didn't really have a choice.

Their most important responsibility was to protect the Starry Wasps, and the life of the Ruby Princess was tied to Percy's. Leaving House Avalon to fend for themselves was equivalent to putting Percy and, by extension, the entire hive in harm's way.

Besides, who was going to complain?

Half the Great Houses had already taken up arms against Percy's coalition, while the other half had willingly ignored Machaon's even-worse crimes. It would be hypocritical of anyone to criticize Percy over something this minor.

Not in the mood to agonize over Remior's political landscape, Percy chose an empty patch of dirt near the middle of the small village, steering his fellow aspect towards it. Not only did Micky not slow down as he approached the ground, he flapped his enormous wings repeatedly to accelerate.

Diving head-first, the colossal crow didn't even attempt to land properly, nor did he crash as one might expect. His body splashed against the dirt, liquefying into a wave of frigid water that combined with Percy's domain to cushion his own landing.

Before Percy took his first step, a person-shaped blob rose from the mud next to him, rapidly transforming into a man with four arms, a toned torso covered in tribal tattoos, and a curved beak. The grey ice comprising Micky's body squirmed for the briefest of instants, before assuming the colour and texture of skin and clothes.

Percy and Micky had decided not to hide the Huehuan's origins any longer. Phoebe and the other gods already knew about him anyway, and Percy didn't care if the idea of an extraterrestrial migrant happened to unnerve a few close-minded nobles.

Leaving aside the fact that Micky was Percy's closest friend, it was debatable whether he could be considered a foreigner at this point. He had spent the entirety of his second life here, so even the planet itself would probably recognize him as its own child.

The members of House Avalon that saw them weren't surprised, having already seen Percy and Micky do plenty of strange things over the past week. A solemn: and even sorrowful: mood filled the camp, since many were still grieving over the dead, though nobody seemed to blame Percy for the war.

Everyone appeared to understand that their world had become a greater spring, and their own family was well on the way of becoming a Great House, all because of him. The war and their subsequent exile from the Camelot province were little more than growing pains: or equivalently, the final attempts of a bunch of old fossils to stubbornly hold onto their fading authority.

Instead of insulting or swearing at Percy and Micky, the nobles saluted them, prompting the aspects of the Lone Wanderer to reciprocate the gesture with nods of acknowledgement.

Scanning the camp, Percy located Archibald in an instant. He was sitting inside one of the larger tents, pouring life mana into the embryo of a clone. Over a hundred fully-grown flesh puppets stood outside

the patriarch's abode, though most were survivors from the battle. Only around twenty had been created recently.

Percy wasn't surprised that the patriarch was staying in a tent rather than one of the stone houses. Those at the higher grades didn't mind camping outside, since their bodies were tough enough to easily resist the elements. Archibald had only prioritized the construction of buildings for the families with younger children.

Not wanting his grandfather to stop his work to greet him outside, Percy asked Micky to accompany him to the Violet's tent. There was a lot that they had to discuss.

Percy had plenty of projects that he hoped would bolster his strength in the next few years, but there were also certain levers of political or diplomatic power that he had arguably neglected over the past decade. Given how dire the situation was, he couldn't afford to do that any longer.

It was time to spread not only his boosting art, but even the Moirais' Decree far and wide: within reason of course.

Percy's entire family, as well as the allies who had proven their loyalty in the recent battle would be given priority, though everyone receiving his gifts would have to sign a strict magical contract enforced by Kerfyl's Decree, to guarantee their continued loyalty and discretion.

Now that the Ruby Empress had advanced to White, Percy even had access to a lot of extra royal jelly that he might be able to spare for a few of his most important allies, with Archibald naturally being at the very top of the list.

'The next time that bastard, Machaon, decides to show his ugly mug, he's in for a nasty surprise…'

Chapter 709: Alliance logistics

"My teeth and nails are still red," Archibald said, grinning inquisitively while staring into a shard of grey ice that Micky's main body had repurposed into a mirror.

The patriarch's scalp was as smooth as always, his face looking not a day over thirty, despite having been around for over twenty times that long. Ignoring his unassuming grey eyes and other generic facial features, he seemed only concerned with his creepy smile and magical manicure.

'Well, I wasn't here to prevent the mutation from spreading to those body parts when you consumed the ruby powder, but I can stop your nail matrix and dental sacs from continuing to attach it,' the clone possessing him explained. 'I guess that your nails will be back to normal in a few months, though you'll probably have to pull out your teeth and grow new ones with your life mana.'

Percy's main body had already left the tent alongside his fellow aspect after placing a piece of his soul in his grandfather's body. They still had hundreds of relatives to grant new mana cores and regular teeth to, though very few people would get to chat with the clone afterwards.

The corner of the patriarch's lips twitched, though he eventually sighed in resignation. "Doing it for the whole family will be inconvenient. I'm not looking forward to telling parents that I have to break their child's teeth, though I suppose a little pain is better than having coloured teeth for the rest of their lives."

'Broken teeth are the least of their worries,' Percy said. 'Don't forget that I'll have to possess them to apply the changes, and soul injuries hurt a lot more than physical ones. It's a good thing we didn't let anyone too young consume the powder.'

"It is. Receiving a new mana core is also a great way to console the unlucky ones," Archibald agreed, before moving to a different topic. "Have you decided which of your resources you're going to share?"

The clone mentally nodded. 'Please invite the other families to the Guild. I know how difficult it is for everyone to move at once, so it's fine if they send a few mages at a time to receive their new cores, ruby powder and the Dance. I can also spare enough Gloomy Dawn for eleven mana cores without eating into my reserves. We'll have to carefully consider who gets it.'

Initially, Nephthys and her mother had struggled to produce enough royal jelly for their own second cores and all of Percy's and Micky's. Thankfully, their output had greatly increased over the past decade. Even before her recent evolution, the Ruby Empress had been able to support everyone nearly twice over by herself.

Her first core's promotion to White hadn't quite tripled her production, because she still had to rely on her acid mana to support it, but developing her new mutations had helped her do that more efficiently, so her output had still taken another massive leap forward.

Archibald nodded. "We'll have to be smart about it. Give it to those who will have the biggest impact on the war. It would be wasted on my first core, since it'd still be centuries away from White."

'Indeed. It should place your second core around four years away from Blue though, so you're still getting some,' Percy said. 'The same applies to Periphetes and the Violets of the allied Houses. That's all I can afford right now, but the royal wasps keep getting better at producing it and I at brewing it. It won't be long before I can spare some for the Guild's Violets, followed by our family's Blues.'

"Give some to Galahad then," Archibald suggested. "His first core should be the closest to Violet. Maybe fifteen years away with Gloomy Dawn? After that, just help everyone raise their second core to Blue."

The wasps weren't ready to support so many people just yet, so Percy would have to push things along. He was still too scared to artificially promote his familiar's first core to Blue: especially after nearly losing control of the Cradle near the end of the recent battle: but promoting her second core should be fine. It wouldn't be long before the first one advanced naturally either.

As for the next natural advancement of the wasps' second cores, Percy expected it to take another fifteen years. It wasn't a short time, but he doubted that the enemy patriarchs would master the Dance sooner than that.

'So many things to do…' Micky groaned through their connection.

'At least it's not going to eat up too much of our time,' Percy consoled him.

Even granting the Moirais' Decree to half a million wasps had only taken about six months. The Alchemists' Guild and the allied Houses only had a fraction of the population, so giving them their new cores wouldn't be difficult.

Adjusting how the mutation affected their bodies, placing them under standardized soul contracts, and having somebody from his family teach them the boosting art would add to the time he spent possessing each of them, but he still didn't think that it would take more than a few weeks.

The main reasons he hadn't done that before had been the impracticality of flying to each of their provinces, and the urgency of his artificial advancements. His current projects were much smaller and not nearly as time-sensitive, so he didn't mind rewarding everyone for their loyalty, so long as they made the effort of travelling to him.

As for brewing the extra Gloomy Dawn? His oversized cauldron allowed him to process vast quantities of ingredients at once, and each brewing session only lasted a few minutes, so Percy wouldn't even notice the additional doses. In fact, he was already processing every drop of royal jelly the wasps produced. The only difference would be his stockpile no longer growing.

'Grandpa, now that the smaller stuff is out of the way, how does the idea of artificially promoting your cores sound?'

Archibald's first core might be too far away from its next natural advancement, but they didn't have to wait that long. Producing another White mage would be one of the quickest ways to strengthen the alliance greatly: especially if he happened to have another Violet core on the side.

"Isn't that more time consuming than the other things we discussed?" Archibald asked with a frown.

'It is,' Percy admitted.

Giving someone the Cradle meant possessing them for months to familiarize himself with their affinities, draw the seals inside their cores, and coach them on how to use them. He could potentially skip the first part if he picked somebody with an affinity that he was already proficient with, and the last part if he left them alone to tinker with the construct by themselves, but the middle part would still take a lot of time to complete.

Artificially promoting someone's cores would tie up one of Percy's clones for a full year, which was why he had no intention of doing that for a bunch of strangers. Turning Periphetes or the Ruby Empress into demigods would help him greatly, but he'd rather invest that kind of effort into his own family.

Even among his relatives, he'd only consider those that he was closest to: meaning just Archibald and Elaine. Maybe Galahad too, to pay him back for training him. If it hadn't been for his uncle teaching him how to resist a Blue's domain, Percy might have failed to rescue Micky from Acton.

"Well, I'm not going to refuse a free advancement if you're willing to give me one." Archibald shrugged. "What do we have to do?"

'Not much. I'll stay with you and ask my main body to place another clone in Elaine for a few months to get used to your life and mud affinities. I'm already reasonably good with pure, water, lightning and acid, so I might not need to possess Galahad just yet, depending on what second affinity he awakens. Once I'm ready, I'll need a few more months to actually promote each organ. It should all be done in a year or two,' Percy explained.

His recent advancements had increased his free cords back up to five. With one permanently occupied by the clone in his familiar's body, and two or three clones applying the Cradle to his relatives, he wouldn't have too many to send out. Still, returning to Melodia would only take up a single cord, and it wouldn't be long until he freed up the rest.

'I guess that we can also use this opportunity to oversee the development of the alliance,' Micky pointed out. 'That way, our main bodies will be free to practice their magic.'

Percy nodded through their connection, before mentally grinning. Up until now, very few noble families had dared to stand by his side against Machaon, yet that was about to change.

'I wonder how many Houses will be lining up to join once they hear that we're handing out mana cores like candy.'

Chapter 710: Soul-melting

A day after Percy's return to the Guild, he finished granting new cores to the first batch of allied mages. He expected many more waves of nobles to arrive at the Fungal Spire looking for him in the coming months, but he would hopefully have at least a couple of days of downtime to work on his own projects before the commotion ramped up.

More than once, he'd considered flying to Twilight City or sending Micky to check up on Nesha, since he was quite worried about her. However, he knew that the ambush on her family's murderers had roughly

coincided with the battle in the Whistling Woods. Whatever the outcome, he would have been too late to change it.

Besides, his girlfriend was no longer the lazy and powerless person who had followed him to Bogside town. He trusted that she knew what she was doing, and she'd asked them to let her handle this one on her own.

Sighing, he turned his attention to the other pair of people who had been pestering him for days. 'Just let me eat this Honey Roll first. It's the only thing I've had since yesterday,' he pleaded through the cord.

The clone possessing his familiar stopped bothering him, clearly well aware of how sacred Freddy's masterpieces were. Unfortunately, the person sitting on the sofa across from Percy didn't seem to care.

"I think we should help them now, otherwise we're just holding their training back," Micky suggested.

The corner of Percy's lips twitched at the betrayal, but he knew that his friend was right. Biting the rest of the warm pastry softly, he held it between his teeth as he used his willpower to keep the dripping honey from staining his couch. Borrowing some soul-freezing liquid from his fellow aspect, he turned it corporeal to wash his hands, before storing the sticky water in a corner of his spatial seal meant for garbage. He'd get rid of it later.

Once he was clean, he gestured for Micky to follow him to a newly-built room in his house where a long but narrow shaft connected it to a cave deep below the surface. Nephthys had ordered her subjects to dig out this tunnel a few months ago, to make it easier for him to travel between the world of the humans and that of the Starry Wasps.

'Sadly, it also enables me to socialize even less than usual, but I can't have everything,' he thought with a shrug as he jumped into the colourful hole.

By the time he reached the bottom, Percy had finished gulping down the rest of his breakfast. Redirecting his domain to his feet, he softened his landing. Micky caught up, perching on his shoulder in the form of a regular-sized crow.

‘I’m on my way to you,’ Percy told the clone and Nephthys through both cords. ‘Care to fill me in on your recent progress?’

The response was prompt and enthusiastic. ‘I’ve finally registered Basic Water Control. I thought I should wait until I’m done with the other two spells before bringing them back to you, which will only take a few weeks. Nephthys and I have also discussed the possibility of adding another type of training into our routine, though we need to figure out what you can actually do with our mana first.’

Percy nodded. The clone possessing Nephthys: or one of the clone’s predecessors, to be exact: had managed to attach soul mana to acid and lightning a few years back. Even better, he had used a trickle of the fused mana to clear and temper the main body’s corresponding channels.

While the original had been too busy with the artificial advancements to work on anything else, the clone had been more than capable of handling everything by himself. Percy’s cords came in four different flavours, with Nephthys and the clone linked to the main body in the second most powerful way.

Regular clones and familiars could only communicate or share mana within a limited range. “Limited” was a relative term, since it easily encompassed entire planets: and possibly even solar systems: but the clones tended to lose contact if they travelled to a world too distant.

Soul Resonance allowed Percy and his clones or familiars to actively empower a cord, widening it and massively expanding its range.

Then there was Soul Harmony, which Percy could only use with a clone possessing one of his familiars. It allowed them to empower both cords at the same time, twisting them into an even wider, two-way connection. By introducing a looping flow of mana around the cords, they could keep them in their empowered state effortlessly.

The only connection even stronger was the one that Percy’s main body shared with Micky. After their fusion, their single soul could freely shift between their two bodies, allowing them to transfer even their spatial seals back and forth.

Despite not being the most powerful variant, the two-way cord was strong enough for a clone to reach to the main body and control it in limited ways, or vice versa. Percy had taken advantage of this ability

over a decade ago, when another clone had saved him the trouble of clearing and tempering his water, air, and ice channels.

The process of fusing soul mana with Nephthys' affinities had also been relatively simple. The clone had used the same approach that had worked for the other elements: overlapping the resources and having his soul mana track the shape and movement of the other affinity until it stuck.

The one thing that they hadn't had the chance to test, had been the main body's ability to wield soul-melting acid and soul-zapping lightning. Even the small trickles of mana that the clone had used to clear Percy's channels had been quite painful, so the clone hadn't wanted to distract the original at such a critical juncture with anything more ambitious.

'Okay. Brew me some then, and let me play with it for a few minutes,' the main body said upon reaching the others.

He transferred some soul mana to the clone and a different resource entered his soul through the other cord a few seconds later, causing him to wince. His counterpart had only sent about a twentieth of his capacity, but that was already enough to cause Percy's soul to bubble and froth, his channels melting into one another and twisting the whole network into an unrecognizable state.

'Fuck, stop!' he yelled through the connection, forcefully blocking the rest of the mana from entering his soul while expelling what the clone had already transmitted. A crisp sound reached his ears as the frozen bird landed next to his boot, writhing in agony.

Examining his mangled soul, Percy was suddenly quite glad that he hadn't allowed even a drop of soul-melting acid into his core. Even if the adaptation runes inside the seals could protect the enchantments from the corrosive resource, the organ itself might have suffered serious damage.

Carving out the injured parts of his soul and regrowing it took several hours. Percy wasn't as keen to keep experimenting with the deadly mana types, but he knew that it had to be done.

'Go slower this time. Start with the same amount you used to temper my channels, and we'll build up from that,' he said.

Following his instructions, the clone sent a much more manageable volume of soul-melting acid this time. It was still quite painful, but didn't corrode his soul faster than the regular soul mana coursing through his channels could mend it.

'This is far more bearable, but useless in a fight.'

Percy's opponents were Whites, so a trickle of Green mana wouldn't help much. Even if he could pour his familiar's entire reserves into a single attack, it was unlikely to put a scratch on the defences of someone like Machaon.

The second problem was that his soul channels were already saturated with soul mana, so he couldn't even fit much soul-melting acid or soul-zapping lightning in their incorporeal states.

For this to work, he would need to phase the elements into the physical plane and store them within the empty acid and lightning channels that the clone had cleared. Bracing himself for yet another form of pain, Percy gathered the fused mana into his hand, moving it to a different mana network and willing it into existence.

His body didn't fare much better than his soul.

His hand instantly swelled, throbbing painfully as black veins spread through purplish skin. Grey acid mixed with blood spilled out of his pores, tearing through his flesh and forming a stinky, viscous puddle of sludge on the ground.

Thankfully, physical pain was much easier to tolerate than spectral, so Percy managed to maintain his composure, studying his damaged limb like a seasoned scholar. Once he felt that he had seen enough, he got rid of the fused mana once more, emptying a few vials of Blue healing ink into his body and letting it work in tandem with his spiritual blood to restore his hand to normal.

'Yeah… this isn't going to work,' he concluded with a frown.

The acid mana was of the same grade as his body, yet it didn't look like he could handle even a relatively small amount, let alone a quantity capable of threatening a Seventh Circle mage.

If it hadn't been for his Blessing of Permanence raising the durability of his soul, and Greater Thess'kalan Physique strengthening his body while elevating its resistance to toxins, he strongly suspected that he would have already melted into a puddle of goo.

'Maybe it's because Nephthys' Acidic Gland mutation has increased the potency of her venom beyond a regular Green's,' the clone suggested. 'Do you want us to try removing its effect from our mana?'

'There's no point,' Percy replied, mentally shaking his head. 'I'm a lot stronger relative to my grade than I was when I experimented with Micky's soul-freezing ice. We'd need to make the venom as powerful as possible to matter, and I clearly can't handle anything close to that.'

'What if I were to use it?' Micky offered. Having recovered from his previous shock, he was sitting in a corner of the vast cavern in his Huehuan form, observing the experiments. 'My soul is as fragile as yours, but my body is tougher and more disposable.'

Percy rubbed his stubble, considering it for several seconds before sighing in defeat. 'I suppose there is no harm in having every possible mana network cleared and tempered in each of our bodies, but it won't be convenient for you to use the soul-melting acid either, since the clone and Nephthys aren't directly connected to you. We'll still have to channel the mana through me, which will burn both sides of our soul before we turn it corporeal. And that's assuming that the clone is even capable of reaching into your body: which is two bodies removed from his own: otherwise we'll have to be the ones putting in the effort during a fight.'

In theory, having access to an additional source of mana would be nice. If they'd had that during the previous battle, they could have killed Machaon before the other patriarchs saved him. However, it appeared too impractical as things stood.

Not wanting to give up so easily, Percy asked his clone to try soul-zapping lightning next. He was able to handle it a little better than the acid, but not well enough to safely handle more than a tenth of his familiar's reserves at once.

'So, what now?' Nephthys asked, sounding quite disappointed. 'Is there nothing I can do to bolster your strength besides producing royal jelly and helping you comprehend a couple of concepts?'

Percy chuckled. ‘It’s not like those are small things. Besides, you’ve also given me an army of millions of wasps. But if you’re talking about your acid mana specifically, I’m sure we’ll figure it out in due time. We always do.’

Percy’s mutation had clearly helped him handle the new affinities much better than he should have been able to, so the most obvious solution would be to strengthen his physique further, somehow.

He still had a complete set of Thess’kalan ritual ingredients in his seal, having bought them from Metatron: who had obtained them from Kassorith. The problem was that undergoing the Ancestral Lineage Sect’s ritual bath multiple times yielded diminishing returns and was less effective on non-Thess’kalans to begin with. Percy had already used two sets of ingredients, so he would be lucky if the third strengthened his physique by more than a single percentage point.

He'd purchased and held on to the ingredients mainly to study them, in the hopes that he could unearth the dormant potential within his own human blood. Like all sapients in the universe, his people had descended from beasts, meaning that their distant ancestors had also possessed stronger bodies before shedding them in favour of intelligence and elemental cores.

Unfortunately, Percy still had no idea where to even begin searching for answers.

‘Keep building your strength for now,’ he said. ‘Have you tried storing soul-melting acid within your venom gland?’

The reincarnated goddess sent a mental nod back. ‘It works, just like we suspected.’

In addition to increasing the potency of her acid mana, the corresponding mutation allowed Nephthys to use her second core and venom sac interchangeably. Much like the relationship between her beast core and jelly gland, it increased her effective capacity far beyond normal.

Due to her Soul Predator mutation allowing her soul to interact with her body more strongly, Percy had hoped that her extra capacity would extend to the spectral variant of her mana. The Ruby Princess could store the deadly resource in her second core, the three sets of mana channels branching out of that, the external flows enveloping her body, her soul channels, and her venom gland: meaning that her total capacity greatly exceeded even a Blue’s.

‘That’s great,’ Percy said, before shifting his attention to the clone. ‘As soon as you register the other Basic Control spells, spend a few months promoting her second core. With both the Cradle and the mutation at her disposal, she’ll definitely have enough mana to produce a peak- Sixth Circle attack, if not higher. She’ll at least be able to defend herself if someone goes after her directly. And don’t worry about strengthening my body enough to handle the acid: I’ll deal with that sooner or later.’