Wanderer 711

Chapter 711: A pleasant visit

Having dealt with Nephthys and the clone possessing her for now, Percy and Micky's main bodies were free to work on their next project. Despite having converted their blood to spiritual blood over a year ago, they had yet to find the time to experiment with the strange resource properly. Of course, their battle against Machaon had already given them a few clues, but there was plenty that they still needed to understand about it.

Just as Percy was about to start, his clone reached out to him once more. 'Nesha's back! She's trying to enter the hive!'

The message was accompanied by a few images that the wasps had probably transmitted to their princess. Thankfully, Percy's girlfriend appeared uninjured, though her face and clothes were caked in dried dirt and sweat, her dark hair even messier than usual.

Percy ignored all of that, focusing on her location. He didn't recognize the exact tunnel through the grainy image, so he asked his familiar to point him in the right direction as he enveloped himself in willpower and took off.

Leaving a booming shockwave behind him, he shot through the colourful caverns like a meteor. His Sage's Pond stretched before him to map out his path, allowing him to travel through the winding corridors of the underground kingdom with shocking precision. Accelerating by the second, he tore a hole through the veil of magical motes dancing in his path, the odd crystal or protruding mineral shattering into powder against his domain.

Percy only cared enough to slow down when he judged that he was close enough to his girlfriend, not wanting to crash into her by accident. He crossed the final stretch of the journey on foot, his steps hurried as he neared his target. His sharp senses allowed him to spot Nesha before she saw him, though it didn't take long for them to fall into each other's arms, hugging tightly.

"I missed you," she said, her voice soft. "The real you, I mean. Not your clones, familiars, or aspects."

Percy replied by planting a kiss in her mouth, not even minding the grime smearing her face. The silence of the mana-lit tunnel was only broken by the sounds of their racing hearts beating in sync. Only after having his fill did Percy bother with words. “Whose blood is this?” he asked, gesturing at her clothes.

“Mine, but I’m not injured anymore. Your grandfather has already fixed everything. I stumbled upon your family on the way here,” she explained.

Percy’s heart leapt to his throat. “Did you run into trouble?”

“Not much. The Syndicate’s Blues chased me for the first quarter of the journey, but they eventually realized that they weren’t going to catch me. I’m not even sure they would have done anything to me, since hurting me or handing me over to the Divine Root would have broken their neutrality. I’m pretty sure that they just wanted to give me a symbolic slap on the wrist for causing trouble in their city before letting me go, though I didn’t want to risk it. The most troublesome part of the trip was finding safe hiding spots to rest, since I don’t have your Insomnia trait, nor your Sage’s Pond.”

Percy felt a pang of guilt upon hearing that. Perhaps he should have gone to pick her up after all. At least she’d made it back safely in the end. “I take it you succeeded?”

She nodded. “There were some complications, and my victory ended up being narrower than I would have liked, but they’re dead. And you? Your grandfather has mentioned some of what happened, but not everything.”

Percy shook his head. “Not good. Machaon is still alive, and his side is about to grow even stronger. Come. Let’s get you cleaned up while I fill you in. There’s no need to have this conversation while standing in a tunnel.”

Leading her to his residence in the settlement, Percy went over everything that had happened in the Whistling Woods, as well as his actions since.

“Volunteering some of your secrets to expand our alliance was the right call. We can’t afford to be too stingy given the circumstances,” Nesha said as they entered his house. “Let me have a look at the terms of the soul contract you’re asking them to sign later: just in case you missed something. Also, it might be a good idea for me to be there when you possess them, to ask a few key questions and make sure that they aren’t lying.”

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Percy nodded, having already planned to do both of those things when she arrived.

“We can go over the boring stuff later: you must be tired. The bathroom is over there. I’ll be in the living room if you need anything…” he started to say, though his voice trailed off as he thought of something that caused him to scratch his head in embarrassment. “Erm… unless you’d rather get your own place? Sorry. I guess that we’ve been apart for a while, so I shouldn’t have assumed. It’s fine if you’re not ready to–”

She was the one who kissed him this time, sealing his mouth mid-sentence.

“Percy… I haven’t run all the way from Twilight City to ‘get my own place’,” she said once their faces parted, her lips curling up into a playful smile. She gave the house a quick scan before shifting her gaze back at him. “I’ll miss our little hut in Bogside town, but I’m not going anywhere.”

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A few hours later, Percy and Nesha were lying together in the former’s bed, their bare skin glistening with sweat. They’d already filled each other in with their latest news between… other activities.

“I guess it’s a little weird that only one of us needs sleep,” he said. “I’d offer to place a clone in your body, but that’s only going to make other things awkward.”

She chuckled. “No need. I know that your cords are on short supply, and we’re both going to be busy anyway. If we can spare a few minutes for each other every other day, it’ll be more than enough.”

Percy sighed. He hadn’t enjoyed anything this much since Bogside town: though the first Honey Roll he’d eaten after reuniting with Freddy had admittedly come close. Had it been up to him, he would take a break from everything for a week or two to spend with his girlfriend. Unfortunately, there were too many people counting on him to grow strong enough to defeat Machaon, Theseus and Morpheus.

“What’s your plan for the foreseeable future?” he asked.

“I’ll reach out to my associates in Twilight City and try to salvage as many of my connections and as much of my information network as I can. Afterwards, I’ll work with Orin, Archibald, and the leaders of the allied Houses to grow our coalition, so that you can focus mainly on the things that you’re good at. I also had a few other ideas that I’ll have to discuss with House Etna,” Nesha explained.

“Such as?”

She shrugged. “I was thinking about those spatial pins that double as communication devices that you saw on Thess’kala. With my affinity and current magiscript skills, I think I should be able to create something similar. If you can get us some dimensional marble from the hive, we might be able to upgrade all of our allies storage devices and give everyone a way of communicating from across Remior in an instant.”

Percy nodded. This was something that he had considered before, which was why he had purchased the corresponding runes from the Vault. The problem was that the enchantments would be significantly weaker if drawn with anything but space mana, and Nesha hadn’t been ready to work on such an ambitious project a decade ago.

It wasn’t like there was no form of long-range communication on Remior. There were bloodlines and devices that allowed for it, but most such means were either slow or otherwise inconvenient. For example, the objects that Jason and Deimos had used required one end of the connection to be fed with karma mana and the other with sound.

House Avalon also possessed a couple of people capable of transmitting vague messages over a vast distance, which was how they had managed to reach out to their allies during the recent battle. However, the enchantments that the artificial world and most greater springs had access to would make everything a hundred times smoother.

Even better, Nesha wasn’t done. “I also recall that you drew a mana-gathering formation around the Fungal Spire.”

“That was a while ago,” Percy confirmed. “It helped both the alchemists and the bugs slightly, but its impact on the hive is somewhat limited.”

“If the Ruby Empress allows it, I was thinking of getting House Etna to help me draw a much larger, multi-layered formation around her entire kingdom. We aren’t as good as you at runecrafting, but we’ll have a lot more manpower at our disposal.”

Percy couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow.

The Alchemists’ Guild had already increased their output enough to supply everyone on Remior with regular elixirs, but giving away Aurora Dew to the commoners and Red-borns was still out of the question.

Not that such people were likely to help Percy much in the war, but having grown up in similarly-humble conditions, he strongly empathized with the children that couldn’t cleanse their cores properly, and he’d always intended to do something for them as soon as possible.

The Starry Commanders and Breeders were still improving, though their progress had slowed down greatly in recent years, and would probably remain so until their second cores’ next advancement: which was still decades away. The alchemists had also expanded their ranks and raised their average brewing yield after incorporating Percy’s teachings, but that was another thing that suffered from diminishing returns.

Raising the density of ambient mana inside the hive might just be the fastest way to increase the Guild’s output again in the short-term.

“I’ll talk to her later,” Percy said. “It does sound like we’re both going to be quite busy, but I don’t want us to repeat our past mistakes and neglect each other again. Let’s make time for each other: even a little bit.”

She nodded, clenching his hand tightly and leaning in for another kiss.

Chapter 712: Sentries (1)

Having nothing else to do and not wanting to interrupt Percy’s reunion with Nesha, Micky decided to go ahead and start experimenting with spiritual blood on his own. His fellow aspect usually took the lead

on such projects, but there was no reason why Micky wouldn't be able to handle some preliminary tests to save his friend a few precious hours.

Micky wasn't too interested in the healing properties of the blood, since his body was completely malleable and injuries didn't really hinder him in any way. At the same time, he understood that his very existence was currently held together by Percy's bloodline, which was ultimately tied to the latter's survival. It would be remiss of him to not at least go over what they had learned during their battle against Machaon.

As they had hoped, Percy's spiritual blood had proven quite effective at staving his fatigue off and accelerating his recovery. Despite his powerful physique, Percy would have never managed to inject so many doses of Blue trollsfury ink into his body in a row without it, since the potions were a grade higher than his own.

Even better, spiritual blood appeared to synergize extremely well with other forms of healing. It had made both the Blue ink and Archibald's treatment faster and smoother than it would have been. The fact that the concentration of magical blood inside Percy's veins didn't seem to have dropped in the slightest was just icing on the cake, as it meant that its effect was entirely passive.

Perhaps, their blood would eventually thin if they relied on it often and a long time were to pass since its creation, but that wasn't a serious problem. At worst, Percy and Micky might have to spend an hour or two every couple of years to replenish the lost volume.

'This will probably become more of an issue when he starts bleeding himself to feed his herbs, but I'll let him worry about that one,' Micky thought with a shrug.

Unfortunately, even the combination of spiritual blood and thrice-compressed healing ink had its limits. Percy hadn't been able to regrow his severed leg, nor was he likely to replace a destroyed organ, though anything short of that appeared to be well within his power.

If they managed to brew healing ink two grades higher than Percy, they might be able to lift that limitation, though that came with its own set of problems: their cauldrons could only handle Blue ingredients at the moment, and there was another issue that they had discovered after their artificial advancements.

Compressing their potions up to Blue had required more gravity herbs than expected: probably because the plants were only at Red. Apparently, if there were too many grades separating the primary and secondary ingredients in a concoction, the latter wouldn't be as effective.

Even if Percy and Micky somehow managed to strengthen their cauldrons enough to handle Violet ingredients, the Red herbs they had been using wouldn't generate enough pressure to compress them, regardless of quantity.

A possible solution might be to look for Orange gravity herbs. Assuming that there were any on Remior, they would be considered primary ingredients in other concoctions, but they would be taking on a secondary role in this particular recipe. If Percy and Micky didn't find any, it might be possible to compress their current ingredients to Orange or Yellow, before using them on the mushrooms.

'I suppose that's not a priority right now. It's too complicated and the gains would be small. Let's revisit it once we're done with more promising avenues of research.'

Even if the superior ink could regrow Percy's limbs, it wouldn't work fast enough to matter in a fight. It would be simpler for Micky to just give his friend temporary limbs fashioned out of living ice, like they had done while fighting Deimos. The problem was that mana was scarce in such high-level battles.

He sighed. Leaving their alchemical ventures aside for now, he moved on to another facet of their spiritual blood that had made itself apparent during the fight. Tearing his hand off, Micky willed it to transform. The severed piece of ice melted into an amorphous blob of grey liquid that squirmed enthusiastically for a couple of seconds before settling into the shape of a baby crow.

The moment the frozen hatchling came into existence, Micky felt his senses branch out and split off in a new direction, his real body towering before his extra pair of eyes. Even better, the tiny bird didn't seem to be limited to just regular sight. Micky's grey soul, Blue and Green mana, pitch-black willpower, and low temperature were all visible within the second instance of his Sage's Pond.

'Interesting. I wonder what its range is.'

Percy and Micky had already noticed that they'd been able to handle more constructs than usual during the battle, and that those fashioned out of Micky's body had fed a lot of additional information into

their mind. They'd expected some of those changes after learning about the Penitent's Decree on Marador Prime, but they hadn't had the time to explore its limits properly.

Taking control of his miniature self, Micky flew into the nearest tunnel, speeding away from his main body. At first, he carefully steered the construct through the winding corridor, mindful of crashing the fragile hatchling into a wall, though he eventually remembered that he could just phase the whole thing out of the material plane. After all, his blood and mana were interchangeable, and the small bird didn't even possess a core to stop it from turning completely incorporeal.

The range of Micky's senses had initially not increased much, since the tiny crow had been quite close to his main body, but his Sage's Pond quickly stretched into an oval shape as the creature slipped through layers of stone and coloured minerals, moving away from him.

The small bird reached the surface and kept flying away from the Fungal Spire. Only when it was roughly seven kilometres away from Micky did the enormous bubble of information finally split into two spheres. The second Sage's Pond was slightly smaller than the original, but only because the sentry didn't possess a domain of its own. More importantly, Micky could still control the bird as easily as his remaining limbs.

'Holy shit! This is crazy!'

The construct was even easier to control than the tiny puppets they had fashioned out of Kassorith's blood, and its senses didn't seem to lose to the main body's in the slightest. Percy and Micky had hypothesized that the latter's unique constitution would synergize extremely well with the Decree, though the results were even more shocking than they had expected.

'I suppose that it makes sense. The material I crafted it out of is simultaneously my blood, a piece of my flesh, and a portion of my mana. It benefits from both facets of the Decree, as well as the unique properties of the soul affinity,' Micky reasoned.

Seeing as the small crow showed no sign of stopping or growing more difficult to control, Micky tested a few additional things.

After ensuring that he could turn the bird corporeal, ethereal, visible and invisible, he played around with its appearance, cycling through various critters native to Remior or Huehue. Since Micky was able

to rob the construct of its mass, it wasn't difficult to fashion it into a flying rat or snake, though it looked quite unnatural running or slithering through the air. It made more sense to give it a shape that fit with its surroundings, so that it would blend in.

One advantage that the construct had over regular blood sentries was how easily it could hide in plain sight, disguise itself into other forms, or escape through solid surfaces. Micky had peeled away and regenerated a few of the seals inside his cores and was constantly circulating the enchanted pieces through his channels to conceal his mana. That property had extended to the construct, so he could even hide it from Mana Sense or Soul Vision if he wanted.

'It's like the ultimate spy!'

Micky could send a regular-looking pigeon or mouse into a town and scan everything in the area. Even if somebody noticed it, he could have it flee into the ground and pop out of a tree trunk a hundred metres away as a squirrel. He should even be able to play around with the controlled-concealment runes inside the construct's body to give it a fake Red core that one would expect to see in a mundane animal.

Happy with what a single construct could accomplish, Micky tried severing additional chunks off his body, sending each tiny creature in a different direction. Dozens of magical critters spread out from the Fungal Spire, a colossal bubble of information stretching for kilometres around each one. Micky handled the first handful or so well enough, though a splitting headache brought him to his knees as more and more data slammed into his brain.

Not one to give up at the first hurdle, he peeled his attention away from most bubbles of information, concentrating on only four or five at a time. That greatly lessened the pain, allowing him to keep pumping out his sentries.

'Okay… it looks like I can have way more than a handful of Ponds active at a time, though I can't pay attention to all of them simultaneously.'

It was a bit like reading a book. One could technically see the whole page at a glance, but most people would have to read the text line by line.

Still, dozens upon dozens of sensory domains spread out around the slender mountain, their edges fusing together into a vast, pie-shaped bubble of information that was only a few kilometres tall but

over sixty wide. Micky was only capable of focusing on a relatively narrow region, but he could still slowly scan the whole thing over several minutes.

Eventually, he discovered a second limitation: a more absolute one. After the hundredth or so construct, he found it difficult to create more. As soon as he tried, both his main body and the existing critters began to squirm violently, struggling to hold their shapes.

'Micky! What the hell, man?!' Percy yelled through their connection. 'I'm in the middle of something!'

'Sorry!' Micky told the friend who his experiments had apparently also affected. Reabsorbing the most recent construct into his body, he reined in the sensory information, keeping it from leaking to his fellow aspect.

The feeling just now had reminded him of when Percy exceeded his clone limit. Was this what this was? Had the combination of the Penitent's Decree and Micky's unprecedented status as a Dead Winter Elemental produced a cheap imitation of the Clone bloodline?

'Well… it looks more like Archibald's version than Percy's,' Micky thought.

While Micky's sentries could be considered "soul clones", they were functionally closer to the mindless flesh dummies that Percy's relatives produced. They didn't possess mana cores of their own, and had to be remotely controlled by Micky, since they couldn't move or act independently.

Regardless of what he compared his new ability to, there was no doubt that it was extremely powerful and versatile. Micky's mind was already racing with ideas on how he and Percy might be able to take advantage of it, fully aware that he had barely scratched the surface of what should be possible.

His Status agreed.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Hybrid Art: Chameleon's Skin: Refined -> Hybrid Art: Shapeshifting Sentries: Masterful!]

Percy: who had clearly also read the notification: grunted through their connection, sounding annoyed and curious in equal parts. ‘Fine, you have my attention. I’m heading your way,’ he spat, before adding, ‘Oh, but make sure Nesha doesn’t see you for a couple of days. She sounded quite angry.’

Chapter 713: Sentries (2)

Percy had to pick his jaw off the rough floor of the cavern as his fellow aspect brought him up to speed on their new spell. He had yet to fully understand its nuances, but it was clear that it was one of the strongest they’d ever registered.

‘It’s almost worth interrupting me and Nesha over.’

Or maybe not, but that ship had already sailed. Perhaps, Phoebe’s Decree would give him a way of muting notifications the next time it evolved, though he wasn’t going to hold his breath.

The best part about the new spell was that Percy could apparently also tap into Micky’s sentries, since they technically still shared a single mind, with their personalities only separated by a thin film that they could easily and selectively poke holes into. Reaching into the tiny constructs that the Huehuan had scattered around the Fungal Spire, Percy whistled in amazement as his gaze swept over the surrounding fields and grasslands.

Percy had been capable of creating cloaked phantoms to fight alongside him for years, but those were simply attacks with pre-programmed movements. Unlike his friend’s sentries, the phantoms didn’t provide Percy with any sensory information, nor could they survive for very long or too far away from his body.

Micky’s ability wasn’t perfect either, of course. They’d already discovered a few additional drawbacks in the past couple of minutes.

For one, the Huehuan struggled to control more than twenty puppets at the same time. Each critter still functioned like an extension of his limbs, but even a Huehuan wasn’t used to having quite as many limbs. Micky could only examine a handful of Pond-sized regions at once, and he could only move four times as many sentries around, leaving the rest standing still. Percy could help his friend double both of those limits, but over half of Micky’s constructs would still remain immobile at any given time.

“I guess there’s no point in using my own blood for reconnaissance then. Yours is objectively better for this task, we can both control it, and you can produce more sentries than both of us combined can handle,” Percy summarized.

“Agreed. Yours might be better for experimenting with our ingredients, since mine will probably just freeze the herbs to death,” Micky replied.

Another issue was keeping the constructs transformed. Micky still wasn’t great at shapeshifting into forms that he or Percy hadn’t experienced in the past. The good news was that his constructs only had to look convincing. They didn’t have to fight or carry heavy loads, so it didn’t matter whether they were structurally or mechanically sound on the inside.

However, there were too many to pay attention to at once. Focusing on some caused the others to deform into amorphous blobs of grey liquid, making them stick out like sore thumbs and leaving them vulnerable to threats in their surroundings.

“I suppose that you could transform most of them into inanimate objects like pebbles or puddles of water and keep them still, though a perceptive mage might still notice that something is off. The biggest advantage of your sentries is how natural they can look if we put in the effort,” Percy explained.

They would have to practice keeping all the constructs disguised and moving around, even if they couldn’t handle all the sensory information they provided. Ideally, they would concentrate their senses on a few while reserving a modicum of attention to sustain the rest.

Another issue was that Percy and Micky would have to be mindful of the distance between neighbouring sentries once they started moving around en mass, so as to keep the bubbles of information spaced out properly. If a pair drifted too far apart, their Ponds would separate. Due to the way the spell worked, it was more efficient to keep the bubbles linked, since they fed information into one another, allowing Percy and Micky to interpolate between them.

Finally, the constructs didn’t just have to look like unassuming critters. They also had to move like them. Micky would have to study and hone their behavioural patterns as much as he did their shapes and colours.

“Do you want me to work on this project with you?” Percy asked after explaining his thoughts.

Micky hesitated for a couple of seconds before shaking his head. “No need. Spells like this aren’t exactly my area of expertise: you know that I’m more into straightforward fights. But this is an ability tied to my own body, and I know how busy you are with everything else. I guess I’ll just have to figure it out on my own. I didn’t have anything urgent to work on, anyway.”

Percy patted his friend on the shoulder, nodding at him gratefully. “Have you tried making them bigger or stronger?” he asked, switching to a slightly different topic.

Micky raised an eyebrow, having clearly not thought of that. Over the next fifteen or so minutes, he called the constructs back, gathering them on the ground before him. Grabbing the nearest fake rat, he tried to pour more mana into its body, though that only exposed two additional problems.

First, he didn’t seem to have much spiritual blood left inside his main body, and diluting the construct with regular soul-freezing ice appeared to destabilize it. If it had just been that, Micky could have taken a few days to replenish his reserves before trying to supercharge the sentry again.

The second issue was that when he tried to pour the few dregs of spiritual blood that he had left into the icy rodent, his main body and every single sentry in the cavern squirmed violently, just like they had earlier. Even Percy was hit by a wave of vertigo that nearly knocked him off his feet.

“Pouring too much spiritual blood into a single sentry yields the same result as creating too many of the smaller ones. I guess that my capacity also has to do with the amount of spiritual blood I use: not just the number of portions I split it into,” Micky concluded.

Percy nodded. This meant that there was no point in Micky accumulating more spiritual blood, since he wouldn’t be able to use it.

Spiritual blood was an interesting resource because it seemed to automatically compress itself as Micky changed his size, allowing him to always retain roughly the same amount in his body regardless of his form. Or perhaps, it might be more accurate to say that the pieces of his soul residing within the liquid shrank or expanded to fit into the changing volume of magical water.

“Can you reabsorb them to retrieve the blood you’ve already spent and free up your slots?” Percy asked.

“I can,” the Huehuan confirmed. “I’ve already tested that earlier.”

Percy rubbed his chin, pondering over the implications. “You clearly can’t have a hundred sentries bigger than these, but what if you were to concentrate the same amount of blood on fewer constructs?”

Heeding his friend’s instructions, Micky retrieved the resource before pouring it into ten person-sized sentries that resembled his original Huehuan appearance. The volume of spiritual blood that he had recovered wasn’t quite enough for the much larger constructs, but he was able to dilute them slightly with a modest amount of regular mana without weakening or destabilizing them in any measurable way.

Taking hold of five constructs each, Percy and Micky played around for a few minutes. Each possessed a sensory domain as powerful as before: which wasn’t ideal. It meant that cutting the number of sentries down to a tenth had directly reduced the amount of data they could gather. At least, the person-shaped constructs could still turn invisible and intangible, as well as transform into any humanoid shape that Percy and Micky were familiar with.

“In most situations, it’s an objectively worse option for reconnaissance, though being able to disguise the sentries as people might allow them to sneak into places where a rodent or bird wouldn’t be welcome,” Percy said.

“Do you think they’re strong enough to fight?” Micky asked.

Percy shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

Micky reabsorbed eight sentries, leaving only a pair behind. He and Percy took control of one each, willing them to shapeshift into their own bodies. Not bothering with pleasantries, the constructs shot at one another, engaging in a brutal fist fight.

A series of loud impacts shook the cavern, the sentries’ figures deforming and regenerating as their strikes pelted each other with short-lived craters. Percy and Micky tried to grant their avatars mana or willpower to give them the edge, though nothing worked. A few minutes later, Percy’s replica was the first to stand down, its handler having seen enough.

“Their physical strength isn’t bad for their size, since they technically possess the flesh of a Blue beast with a second core and an evolved mutation. Unfortunately, they are much smaller and don’t have your cores, beast mana, or willpower to fully reproduce your strength,” Percy said.

“Greens then? Roughly?” Micky asked.

“More or less.” Percy nodded with a frown. “Controlling ten Green-level combatants is frankly… useless to us.”

The combat version of the spell resembled Archibald’s version of the Clone bloodline even more closely. The Huehuan’s sentries were better in some ways, but worse in others.

Percy’s grandfather couldn’t turn his clones invisible or shapeshift them, and they certainly didn’t grant him the kind of sensory information that Micky’s sentries did. However, the patriarch of House Avalon could boost the strength of his minions with life mana, or have them deliver deadly diseases to his opponents.

In terms of raw power, Micky’s constructs were stronger for their grade. They could probably go toe to toe with Archibald’s despite being only at Blue. The problem was that the Huehuan could control much fewer minions than one of Percy’s relatives.

A Blue life mage with Circulation and the Clone bloodline: which was the most reasonable point of comparison to Micky in this case: could command over a hundred and sixty clones, in theory. Granted, Percy’s relatives had to constantly feed them their mana, which Micky didn’t have to do, so they never kept that many around. Still, the Huehuan’s capacity was pitifully low.

Not satisfied with that, Micky and Percy played around with the size of the constructs some more, looking for a more favourable configuration. They weren’t able to find one, since the number and strength of the sentries appeared to scale in weird ways.

If they made them any smaller than rats, the size of their Sage’s Pond shrank rapidly without giving them nearly enough additional slots to compensate. If they made them any larger than a human, the number of slots shrank steeply without making them much stronger.

The only semi-usable configurations seemed to be the vermin-sized scouts and the person-sized combatants, though Percy and Micky confirmed that they could keep around a mixture of the two types: such as four fighters and sixty rats.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter whether they’re better or worse than your family’s bloodline,” Micky said. “The only question is whether they’re of any use to us like this.”

Percy tried to think of an application, though he struggled to come up with anything. Splitting the sentries into two groups, they might be able to keep a couple of Blues busy for a while, but that wasn’t a big deal when Percy could slaughter Blues like chicken.

The main advantage of the constructs was that they could travel far away from his and Micky’s bodies. Maybe they could have them escort a few weaker allies like Owain or Freddy in a dangerous area: if their main bodies were otherwise occupied: though Percy couldn’t think of a situation where that would be necessary. Besides, he had access to enough actual Green subordinates nowadays that he could just send a bunch of them to do it.

“Hmmm… the only possible place where my sentries’ combat strength would be relevant would be our clones’ adventures,” Micky said. “If we had to possess a Red or Orange host, having several Green bodyguards around wouldn’t hurt. It’s a pity that’s not an option…”

Percy raised an eyebrow, taken aback by his friend’s random comment. “Maybe it is.”

Micky frowned. “We can’t store the sentries inside the spatial seals. I’ve already tried. How would we get them to our clones?”

Percy shook his head. “Spiritual blood or not, your sentries are made entirely of a variant of soul-freezing ice. If we liquefy them, we might be able to send them directly through the cords and reform them at the other end.”

Micky’s eyes widened. Not wasting any time, he grabbed one of the remaining sentries, absorbing it into his body. He didn’t let the substance fuse into him completely, pushing it through his soul channels and into the connection instead.

Not even a second later, Percy felt something cold seep into his soul, causing the corner of his lips to curl up. Stretching out his hand, he poured the substance into a shallow but wide puddle by his feet, willing it to transform into a replica of his body like before.

The sentry obliged, rising to Percy's height in no time!

Micky drew a sharp breath. "This… changes everything."

Percy grinned, sharing the sentiment. With access to an entourage of Fourth Circle combatants, their clones would never be defenceless again. Granted, the zelesian beads fulfilled a similar purpose, though they were much harder to use, and Percy would much rather hold on to the artifacts until he resolved the situation on Remior.

While the sentries couldn't compare with a Seventh Circle domain, they were far more disposable and versatile than the transparent marbles. They could hopefully follow the clones around for days instead of expiring after an hour, and it would be much easier to replace them if they got lost or destroyed.

Finally, this went beyond providing the clones with a couple of bodyguards. If Percy and Micky could send the person-sized sentries over, there was no reason why they wouldn't be able to send them the rat-sized ones too. Their clones would be able to explore their surroundings like never before!

The main bodies would only need to provide each clone with a dozen or so of the smaller sentries for that. It wouldn't be easy for the clones to control more than that anyway. This would allow them to scan entire forests or mountains in mere minutes!

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Percy warned, trying to calm his racing heart down. "Just because the two of us can share them, it doesn't mean that we can send them through the regular cords."

"Try sending it to Nephthys!" Micky suggested.

Percy was already a step ahead, having already pushed the strange liquid through a different cord, along with a brief explanation of what they were trying to do.

The clone wasn't happy, as he was interrupted in a middle of a rather demanding exercise, wasting several hours or work. But he didn't complain too much about it, clearly realizing how important this experiment was.

A few seconds later, Percy had his answer, his lips parting into a toothy grin.

Chapter 714: Unexpected scene

'I can hardly even imagine what we'll be able to accomplish with that spell!' Percy mentally exclaimed as his main body filled him in on Micky's new ability.

Usually, the original wouldn't bother informing the clones of such things, since they would learn everything when they returned to Remior and fused back into his soul. By the time the new set of clones got sent out, they would know anything that might be of use to them.

This clone had been an exception, since he didn't need to personally register Shapeshifting Sentries to take advantage of it. The main body could just send him a couple of liquefied minions through the cord. Not to mention that it was an ability that could prove extremely useful as Percy helped the Melodians expand their territory and claim the Mirror Lake.

'How much longer until she sends out another signal? We've been floating out here for days…' Micky groaned, not sounding nearly as enthusiastic as Percy.

The Huehuan enjoyed their otherworldly adventures as much as Percy did, though he really had zero patience for the part of the journey where they had to search for a host. It had only been two days since they separated from the main body, and this wasn't even Micky's first complaint.

At least chatting with the originals about their recent invention had broken the monotony slightly. The clone hadn't been able to help his main bodies test the new spell, since he didn't possess a body of his own yet. The originals hadn't wanted to disturb Percy's relatives either, which was why they'd ended up bothering Nephthys and the clone possessing her.

'Well… Sol has been producing the signals regularly for the past decade, like we agreed. We'd have to be really unlucky for her to suddenly stop right as we're trying to visit, and it shouldn't be long until the next time she reaches out,' Percy replied, trying to placate his friend.

It seemed to work, for now at least, yet he fully expected Micky to start pestering him again in a couple of hours. Perhaps they should look for a way of adding more specialized features to their Shimmering Constellations mindset at some point, to allow Percy to choose whether to include Micky's mind when creating a clone, or to keep his fellow aspect dormant during the boring bits.

Then again, Percy liked having his friend by his side. It kept the journey more fun for him as well: for the most part: and Micky had contributed plenty of useful ideas in the past, making his inclusion worth the headache. Also, they still didn't have access to a mind mage skilled and trustworthy enough to commission new mindsets from.

Shaking the pointless thoughts off, Percy took a minute to appreciate the complete silence that permeated the space between worlds, before deciding to examine his surroundings to pass the time. Focusing outwards, he allowed his senses to stretch toward the infinite darkness, eventually touching countless silver stars that glowed with various degrees of intensity in every direction.

With practiced ease, he studied the souls surrounding him one by one, though he did so leisurely. Percy wasn't planning to take a detour before returning to Melodia, nor did he expect to stumble upon a promising host during such a brief and half-hearted scan.

However, it appeared that the universe had other plans for him.

'Micky… is that what I think it is?' he asked, staring at a giant silver star that shone more brightly than every other in the region combined.

The radiant sun didn't burn quite as intensely as Nephthys' soul used to, meaning that its owner hadn't even reached the pinnacle of the Self-Discovery stage: let alone Elemental Acquisition: though its dazzling glow still couldn't be compared to a mortal soul. Most importantly, the star was fragmented, its pieces slowly drifting apart and dimming noticeably by the second.

'A dying god!' The Huehuan mentally gasped, before taking on an admonishing tone. 'Please tell me that you're not thinking of doing what I think you're thinking of doing.'

'Are you insane? I'm not suicidal!' Percy hurriedly said, shooting the idea down.

He had no intention of even attempting to possess the deity. If it hadn't been for Nephthys helping him carry a piece of her soul back to Remior, Percy would have never managed to drag it over such a vast distance by himself. Even if this happened to be a friendly god willing to cooperate, Percy was under no delusion that he'd be able to stitch the pieces of the deity's soul together.

The strongest people he had ever possessed had been Violets, and he'd needed either his main body or its full support to grant Archibald and the then-Starry Queen their second cores.

Granted, that had all happened before Percy's artificial advancement, and he did currently have an empowered cord linking him to the original, so possessing a White might not be out of the question. However, a demigod would be pushing it, and the gulf separating the Colour and Concept realms was on a whole other level.

Fortunately, Percy didn't need to possess the dying deity directly to sate his curiosity, since the god wasn't alone. Scanning the surroundings of the silver star, he spotted a dozen or so additional souls. Five more belonged to deities: with another dying among them. The soul of the second unlucky god hadn't deteriorated as much as the first one, yet it was worsening faster, having clearly suffered recent but even more serious injuries.

The survivors didn't appear to be on the same side. Most were wounded: though not quite enough to place them at risk of death: and the wild fluctuations their souls exhibited suggested that they were currently locked in combat.

Most relevant was the fact that there were nine mortals among them. They were split in groups of three, with each group hovering extremely close to a deity. Six were alive and healthy, though the trio next to one of the dying deities were dying themselves.

'Why are there so few souls here?' Micky asked. 'And how did a bunch of mortals get involved in this mess?'

'It must be outer space,' Percy speculated. 'I think half the deities were traveling together, carrying a few mortals in their internal worlds like Lanthaniel did for us. They got ambushed by enemy gods, and each side managed to take a deity down.'

It was the only thing that made sense. It would explain why only three deities were carrying mortals, and why most of the mortals were in relatively good condition, despite being surrounded by warring gods.

Isolated within their carriers' internal worlds, the Colour mages might have not even registered what was happening outside. The three that were dying had probably ended up in that situation indirectly. Perhaps, the world housing them had started collapsing after the demise of its owner, leaving the mortals without air to breathe or freezing them to death. Had they been hit directly by the enemy deities, there would have been no trace of their souls left for Percy to examine.

Micky sighed in exasperation. 'Okay. This time I know what you're thinking of doing. You do understand that a god will be able to stop us from leaving if we get spotted, right?'

Percy mentally shrugged. 'We'll be careful. We'll possess one of the dead mortals, figure out what's going on, check if there's anything valuable we can salvage from the broken internal world, and dip before the other gods are even done with the fight. Even if we end up finding something worth staying for, we'll take precautions to avoid getting trapped.'

Dying gods meant affinity-changing treasures, on top of whatever else the deities in question had stored inside their internal worlds, so this was too big of an opportunity to pass on.

'What if we like our host? Are we going to leave them behind to die?' Micky asked.

'We haven't even met them yet,' Percy replied, figuratively rolling his eyes. 'No matter who it is, we're not going to return to the Vault this soon for their sake. At most, we'll leave them in a good condition. If the gods on their side win, they might be able to rescue our host, but that'll be up to their own luck.'

'Well, you're the one who always gets in trouble helping strangers. As long as we're on the same page about our escape plan, do whatever you want,' Micky conceded.

Percy knew that this could go terribly wrong if he wasn't careful, but he'd never had a chance to watch Concept mages fight, nor had he ever seen a dying god before. Well, he'd seen Nephthys, but the Amenthei goddess had mutilated her own soul to help him carry it to Remior. The Slumber would have killed her eventually, but she had still been in a relatively good condition until she met him. Percy wouldn't mind witnessing the birth of an affinity-changing treasure with his own two eyes: or at least the pair of eyes that he was about to borrow.

Either way, Percy was more than a little curious. Who even were these people? Were they from a couple of rival factions? Were they lesser or greater springs? Or was it a greater spring bullying deities from a lesser one? It seemed unlikely, since the two sides appeared evenly matched, but the weaker world might have simply managed to pull off a successful ambush. Whatever the case, there was only one way to know for sure, and maybe even grab something valuable on the way out.

'I'm sorry, Sol… Doh… Latt… Zoris. You guys have waited a whole decade already. I suppose you'll have to wait just a little longer,' Percy thought as he picked the mortal in the most salvageable condition and dove into the cracks in their soul.

Chapter 715: Sapphire Pavilion

Percy was experienced enough to deduce a lot of information about his new host before even talking to him. He was a male Violet and a relatively young one at that. He definitely wasn't a child, but Percy didn't think that the man was more than a century old.

'Do you think he might be from a greater spring after all?' Micky asked as Percy tried to reach out to their host. 'It would explain why they can afford to send so many gods on a single mission.'

'I'm not sure,' Percy admitted. 'I'm leaning more towards a somewhat-developed lesser spring. The three gods they've sent are too weak to represent a greater spring, and I think that the mortals are more likely to be Green-borns meant to accumulate experience by accompanying their mentors.'

Micky was about to reply, but he was interrupted by the injured man who appeared to have finally realized that someone had infiltrated his body. 'Who or what are you? And what do you want?' the Violet asked coldly.

Percy ignored the man's apprehension, used to it by now. It made sense that his hosts were often wary of a strange presence trying to worm its way into their souls, and that was doubly true given what Percy had learned about demonic infestations and Cardinal Devils.

'I'll give you the short version since we don't have much time: I'm a traveller who can possess hosts on the verge of death. I'm hoping to stitch up your injuries and grant you a shot at survival, while searching your immediate surroundings for anything valuable and asking a few questions about your situation to sate my curiosity. If these terms sound acceptable to you, I'm also going to need a guarantee that you

won't try to kick me out, snitch on me to your people, spill my secrets, or otherwise act against me,' Percy explained.

Their host didn't reply immediately, taking a moment to consider the offer.

'How do I know that you won't do anything weird to my body?' the Violet eventually asked.

'We wouldn't be having this conversation in that case. There was a time when I couldn't possess unwilling hosts, but that time is long gone. I'm only asking for permission because I'm not a complete asshole, and I'm willing to magically bind myself to my words using the same Decree that will bind you to yours. Besides, I don't think you have much left to lose, considering that you'll be little more than scattered space dust in a few minutes.'

The man sighed through their connection, before wordlessly communicating his agreement. Percy activated Kerfyl's Decree to enshrine the terms they had discussed within a magical contract.

'I'm Tiberius,' his host said as Micky started piecing together his soul.

'Percy. Mind briefing me in on the situation so that I know what to expect when we open our eyes?'

'I'm not sure I understand it more than you. Lord Julius' internal world cracked with no warning, leaking all the air out. The three of us tried to plug the holes with our domains, but the damage was too extensive, so we switched to using bubbles of willpower to hold some air around us. It worked until the internal world received a second major blow that caused us to lose control. Unfortunately, none of us had the air affinity and Lord Julius didn't respond to our pleas to fix the place. I was able to hold my breath longer than my companions, but even a Violet can't last forever.'

'Do you have any idea of what may have happened to him?' Percy asked, the information so far being pretty much in line with his guess.

'We must have been attacked by hostile deities, as I can't think of anything else that would have blindsided my mentor like that,' Tiberius said grimly.

Percy didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He'd already deduced that much after seeing the gods locked in combat. If his host wasn't even sure of the basics, then figuring out the identities of the assailants was out of the question. Still, Percy tried. 'Do your people have many enemies?'

'None with the power to pull off such an ambush. Our gods are generally cautious when dealing with outsiders that aren't significantly weaker than us. But we knew that this was going to be a dangerous mission, since there are plenty of space bandits frequenting these parts.'

Percy's non-existent eyes narrowed. Now they were getting somewhere. 'I'm going to need you to elaborate on this "dangerous mission" of yours, and what you mean by "space bandits".'

Tiberius mentally shrugged. 'I suppose that it's not a huge secret, given our location. We were heading toward the local branch of the Sapphire Pavilion for the auction.'

Percy raised a figurative eyebrow. He'd heard of the Sapphire Pavilion before, as they were one of the richest and most famous factions in the universe. They weren't quite at the level of the Moirai or the Void Hand in pure military strength, but they sat comfortably in the top ten. The fact that their planets were spread out across the universe made it easier for a peak faction to invade, but nobody dared to lift a finger against the Pavilion, due to their usefulness. They represented the greatest trading hub for resources and information in the cosmos.

To put their prestige and influence in context, if knowledge of Percy's unique existence and Remior's location were to reach the wrong pair of ears one day, the faction in question would probably rush to the nearest auction to sell the information to the highest bidder: unless of course their own planet was close and powerful enough to act against Percy's people directly.

'Isn't the location of these auctions public knowledge?' Percy asked. 'There should be plenty of powerful factions attending, including greater springs. How are gods from weaker worlds even meant to get there in one piece?'

'There is an unspoken understanding between the attendees to not attack each other en route to the auctions. It can be tempting to steal from a weakling carrying something valuable, but few things are worth getting banned from the Sapphire Pavilion forever. It's also in the best interest of the peak factions to maintain safe passage to the branches, since they don't want us to stop selling them information about newly discovered Elemental Sources, or interesting Decrees and bloodlines that some random world might have recently produced.'

‘And yet, somebody did attack you,’ Percy pointed out.

‘That’s why I said that it’s probably space bandits: rogue gods that have either abandoned, lost, or been kicked out of their planets. They band together, roaming the stars for opportunities. They’re typically considered the dregs of the Concept realm, though anyone capable of forging an internal world is worthy of at least a modicum of respect in my opinion, regardless of their personality. Either way, they’re willing to take risks that others won’t.’

Percy was about to inquire about Tiberius’ own world when Micky reached out to him privately. ‘I’m almost done stitching up his soul, but I’m not sure I like where this is going. You’re already thinking of staying here longer than our original plan and trying to get to that auction, aren’t you?’

Percy made no attempt to hide his intentions from his fellow aspect. ‘It’ll be dangerous, but this is an even more promising opportunity than expected.’

Stumbling upon a greater spring by accident was difficult, and they couldn’t risk returning to the Vault or the Void Hand in the near future. If they wanted to extend their lifespans again and activate their third cores, a gathering of dozens of developed worlds might just be the perfect place for them. That was without even mentioning what other priceless resources they might be able to buy.

It was obvious that Micky wasn’t thrilled about it, but he kept his silence. Percy knew that his friend was just as impatient to build up his strength as he was. Leaving aside the fact that the Huehuan also cared about defeating Machaon and helping Marnok, his ultimate goal was to grow powerful enough to take down Rhaziel and free his enslaved people. Preferably, he wanted to do that sooner rather than later, since he still hoped to rescue his father: in case the man was still alive somewhere.

‘I don’t disagree with the why. Just the how,’ Micky finally said. ‘Assuming that the gods on our host’s side win the conflict, we’ll still have to explain his survival and keep our existence hidden throughout the trip. If that’s not problematic enough, we’ll have to figure out how to participate in the auction. Tiberius is probably only meant to watch, since the gods won’t pay much attention to a mortal. And I don’t even want to imagine what will become of us if the bandits win.’

Percy pondered over the issue for a moment. ‘How much are you willing to sacrifice for this opportunity?’

Micky appeared taken aback by the strange question, yet he humoured Percy in the end. ‘While I don’t want us to die, I’m fine with it if it helps the originals return to Felmara an hour sooner. But if we get trapped, your body may permanently lose a cord, and we might be tortured into revealing sensitive things about ourselves or Remior.’

‘Do you swear not to say anything that we don’t agree to share during this trip? And that no matter what happens, you will not remain trapped for longer than a month against your will?’ Percy asked.

‘What do my intentions have to do with any of th–’ Micky cut his question short upon realizing what Percy was trying to do. ‘I swear.’

‘So do I,’ Percy said, activating Kerfyl’s Decree once more.

A second magical contract settled into place, this one burying itself solely within the Lone Wanderer’s soul. Percy had intentionally left himself some leeway, so that he could at least try to escape by himself if he got captured. However, if he remained stuck for weeks without a way out or muttered even a single word that would place his home at risk, the Decree would instantly ensure the clone’s complete annihilation.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Oath of Self-Destruction: Crude!]

Chapter 716: Broken world

Calling the Oath of Self-Destruction a spell was a bit of a stretch, but Percy’s Status did have a track record of rewarding him for taking advantage of his existing abilities in innovative ways. In theory, the clones had always been capable of destroying themselves even without a specialized spell: simply by cutting themselves open with a knife fashioned out of soul mana. However, that might be difficult to pull off under the gaze of a deity. Thanks to Kerfyl’s Decree, Percy had a guaranteed and automatic way for his main body to reclaim a lost cord.

Sadly, the original wouldn’t recover the spatial seal or its contents. The good news was that there wasn’t anything irreplaceable inside it: just a bunch of elixirs, books, and other resources that he’d planned to give to Sol. The zelesian beads were still safe at home.

The seal itself was admittedly quite precious: especially since the current clone possessed a quarter of Percy's capacity. He'd been given more than usual, because the other clones were either with Nephthys or Percy's relatives and hadn't needed seals of their own. Losing this much storage space wouldn't be ideal, but Percy and Micky were willing to gamble it away for a shot at participating in the auction.

'Percy? Everything okay?' Tiberius asked.

'I was finishing up the stitches,' Percy replied with a half-truth.

Fastening the spectral strings that comprised the final preservation rune, he tapped into his host's senses. His new body instinctively tried to inhale, only to find his lungs squeezed tightly and not a whiff of air outside his nose or mouth.

Percy didn't panic, having been informed about this issue. Reaching to the original, he requested some air mana. He made sure to specify that he wanted the regular version: not the gaseous form of soul-freezing ice, since his host might not be able to handle or breathe it in.

Well… technically, it wasn't possible to send normal air mana through the cord. The main body would have to attach at least soul mana, but the resource would be functionally identical in its corporeal state. Even if it wasn't, the clone should be able to break it apart into its components.

A few seconds later, Percy received the promised trickle of mana, confirming that his ethereal cords were capable of bridging internal worlds with the broader universe. With any luck, it also meant that the clone would be able to escape away from this place if the need arose.

After instructing Micky to keep drawing mana from the cord to continuously manifest breathable air inside their host's lungs, he finally opened his borrowed eyes.

'This internal world is nothing like Lanthaniel's.'

Percy had thought that the Tauren deity's patch of desert had been rather small and barren but, compared to this, it might as well have been a luxurious palace. His host was floating in a void, surrounded by debris and a pair of corpses. One of the bodies was intact, but the other had been

bisected, a trail of guts and blood flailing behind each half. Tiberius hadn't mentioned an injury like that, so it must have occurred after the trio's suffocation.

The Violet's heart clenched at the sight of his dead companions, though Percy didn't have the time to console his grieving host. He did, however, briefly examine the fallen mages to better understand what these people looked like.

'Is that armour they're all wearing?' Micky asked, gawking at the plates of polished gold covering the Green-borns from head to toe.

'I think that's just their skin,' Percy corrected his friend upon noticing that the strange exoskeletons transitioned seamlessly into their dark, pupilless eyes and orifices. The golden shells appeared to even cover these people's privates, which made Percy wonder how they relieved themselves. Then again, this was neither the time nor the place to ask Tiberius about that.

The only piece of actual clothing they wore were long, dark capes attached to their shoulders and flowing all the way down to their heels: or at least they would if they were to stand still.

The largest objects in the void were the spinning fragments of what had once been some kind of metallic disk with a diameter of around a hundred metres. Percy guessed that it had been the platform that everything else had previously stood on.

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The owner of this internal world had clearly possessed an air affinity and no other mana types, giving rise to a world that was corporeal but didn't contain any solids by default. They had likely imported the metallic disk to give the mortals a place to stand, though the object didn't seem to have survived the devastation.

Allowing his Sage's Pond to unfold, Percy scanned the place more carefully. His senses only managed to expand up to around a hundred and fifty metres in one direction and a hundred in another before hitting an impenetrable barrier, meaning that the internal world was only about quarter of a kilometre across.

‘Only an eighth of Lanthaniel’s, so a two hundred and fifty-sixth of the volume,’ Percy calculated.

Was this roughly the difference between a god at the peak of the Self-Discovery stage and one that was close to the bottom? Maybe, though Lanthaniel had also ascended with a composite affinity, so the difference was even larger than that. Phoebe had mentioned that internal worlds grew with time as well as comprehended concepts, so Percy would likely need a bigger sample to fully make sense of the underlying mechanics.

More importantly, this internal world felt even more broken than the hulking deity’s: and in more than one way. The concepts that the dying god had mastered were clearly incomplete, and this space didn’t have a shred of mana, nor was it producing any. Some of those deficiencies could surely be blamed on the god’s untimely demise, but he had clearly been relatively unimpressive even in life.

Furthermore, the void was cracked.

Percy felt a sting in his mind as his Sage’s Pond spread over certain spots. He didn’t suffer any actual injury, but merely paying attention to the fissures hurt, making him want to avert his gaze.

‘How bizarre. I’m guessing that these rifts were caused entirely by the god’s death,’ Micky said. ‘I bet that they’re also what tore the corpse in half, so be careful not to fly into them by mistake.’

Percy nodded grimly, though he didn’t give up on studying the distortions. If his friend was right, the air and mana must have leaked out through these dimensional holes, which likely meant that they led to the outside world. Positioning his host at a safe distance, he tried to probe the nearest rift with thin tendrils of willpower.

Fortunately, the crack wasn’t “sharp” at every angle. Like a broken shard of glass, it seemed to have “flat” sections that were safe enough to touch. Percy still wasn’t ready to approach it, but he tried to push his domain through. His efforts were met with a lot of resistance, but the barrier felt softer than the impenetrable boundary of the internal world.

Methodically poking at the almost-spongy wall of space, Percy located a few spots that were even thinner. Applying more pressure, he finally managed to drill all the way through.

Pushing his Sage's Pond through the narrow tunnel, he peered outside. Ignoring the deity's broken corpse for the time being, he tried to examine the divine battlefield, only to be instantly blinded by a bright flash. Not giving up, Percy waited a couple of seconds before sticking his sensory domain out again, this time doing so more successfully.

'What the hell? Are these spells?!'

The gods were too far away and moving too fast for Percy to get a proper look, but he couldn't have missed the enormous projectiles they hurled at one another even if he'd wanted to: meteors as large as mountains, fireballs big enough to melt the asteroids in an instant, and entire seas vast enough to swallow the scorching suns whole.

Strangely, the scene was completely muted. Despite the humongous explosions and the blinding flashes of light, Percy couldn't hear anything but his host's heartbeat. Evidently, sound couldn't travel through the vacuum of space.

This could hardly even be called a battlefield: it was more like somebody had shaken everything off the surface of a planet and stirred the mixture inside the world's largest cauldron. The sheer devastation that the warring deities were unleashing upon one another made the apocalyptic battle between the Lone Wanderer and Machaon look like a couple of children throwing fistfuls of mud.

Every few seconds, a brief pause in the magical barrage allowed Percy to examine the space beyond the battlefield. It was just another void, albeit an infinite one, not that different from what remained of the god's internal world if one were to ignore the stars shining in the distance.

'And to think that Rhaziel is even stronger than them… We still have a long way to go,' Micky muttered bitterly through their connection.

They didn't know how powerful the head of the Felmaran pantheon was, but it was doubtful that one could earn the title "Proudheart" if they were merely at the bottom of the Self-Discovery stage.

Percy wanted to say something to encourage his fellow aspect. Together, they had clawed their way from the bottom of the Colour realm to near the very top: if not in actual grade, then certainly in fighting strength. However large the gap separating them from their enemies was, they would bridge it in due time.

Unfortunately, his host didn't give him a chance to say anything to that effect. 'I know it's an impressive scene if you've never experienced anything like it, but I'm afraid we have more pressing things to worry about.'

Withdrawing his senses from the rift, Percy realized that the destruction of the internal world was accelerating rapidly. There were already three times as many cracks, each several times longer than before. If this continued, there wouldn't be any safe place to float in a minute or two. Worse still, the fragmented space had spread to the boundary of the internal world, destabilizing it and causing it to shrink.

The kilometre-wide sphere was clearly about to implode, with Percy and Tiberius still inside!

Chapter 717: Sailing away within a broken corpse

'Shit! We can't stay here!' Percy mentally exclaimed. 'We'll be crushed into minced meat!'

'What's the alternative?' Tiberius asked, his features contorting into a grimace. 'We won't survive out there either!'

Percy's mind raced like a galloping horse as he tried to come up with a solution. He and his host had no way to shield themselves from a collapsing internal world, nor the deadly spells of the Concept mages, but the two threats were fundamentally different.

The internal world was finite, leaving them with nowhere to go but through the rifts, while outer space was boundless. They just had to move away from the gods to avoid getting hit. The problem was that the deities' battlefield stretched for hundreds of kilometres around Julius' corpse. Tiberius would never manage to cross such a vast distance without getting caught up in a stray explosion.

'We need to push our exit point outside the warzone before we emerge,' Percy told his host. 'Make sure we don't get cut by the spreading rifts and let me worry about the outside world.'

Aware that they were almost out of time, Percy pushed his primary and secondary domains through the crack once more, enveloping the god's body. Julius didn't look that different from Tiberius and the other mortals, though the golden plates coating his flesh appeared a little smoother and glossier. The entire

left side of his body: skull included: was scorched black and melted toward the middle, leaving no question as to how he had been slain.

Percy was honestly surprised that the damage wasn't more extensive given the sheer size of the divine spells that had likely struck the fallen deity. If even a sapient's flesh grew this tough upon their apotheosis, Percy could hardly fathom how powerful the body of a divine beast would be.

'I hope Julius isn't much heavier than a mortal,' he thought as he tried to propel the corpse away with explosions of willpower.

Unfortunately, there were no objects or even air to push against, once again hammering home how inhospitable outer space was. Percy had to discard small chunks of his domain to produce the necessary thrust, which forced him to take short breaks between bursts to recover.

At least his plan appeared to be working. While Julius' body weighed a dozen or so times more than Tiberius' and was capable of remaining relatively intact even after getting hit by literal mountains, it was still lighter than a Green beast, making it relatively easy for Percy to accumulate momentum. The problem was that they still had a lot of space to cover before it would be safe for his host to exit the rift.

Enormous explosions kept going off everywhere around the flying corpse, releasing scorching waves of heat that singed Percy's very mind and forced him to continuously retract his senses back into the unnatural portal. If that wasn't bad enough, the shockwaves kept pushing the god's body in random directions, making it impossible for Percy to pick where to go. The fact that his host was frantically flying within the internal world to dodge the spreading cracks only made peering out of the rift even harder.

'How much longer?!' Tiberius demanded. 'This place has already shrunk to a third of its size, and I'm having trouble tiptoeing around the distortions!'

Percy gritted his borrowed teeth, realizing that they would have to exit in the middle of the battlefield after all. Between certain and almost-certain death, the latter was marginally preferable.

Just as he was mentally debating whether it was worth delaying for another handful of seconds, a giant asteroid slammed onto the front side of the corpse, crushing what was left of the fallen deity's bones into powder.

Percy shuddered upon picturing the grim fate that his host would have suffered had they emerged from the rift a moment sooner. At the same time, he realized that the enormous meteor that had struck them was a literal godsend.

Julius' face was still plastered onto the uneven surface of the flying mountain, getting carried out of the battlefield at a great speed. Better yet, Percy finally had something solid to push against with his domain, using it as leverage to propel the corpse away even faster.

The boundaries of the divine battlefield weren't fixed. The warring deities were constantly drifting wherever the tide of the fight carried them, meaning that there was no clean demarcation where Percy would consider himself "safe" from becoming collateral damage. Still, it became clear that he would have to settle for "safe enough" when one of the spreading cracks inside the internal world tore into the side of his host's torso, leaving behind a narrow but deep wound that barely missed his left lung.

'Oh well… whatever happens happens.'

Pouring every drop of willpower he could muster into the unstable rift, Percy forcefully widened the opening enough for his host to crawl through. Before exiting, Tiberius shot the corpses of the other Green-borns one final, solemn glance. The spreading cracks had shredded them into even more pieces, making it impossible to bring them out.

Percy felt a pang of guilt for not thinking of storing his host's friends in his spatial seal back when they had still been relatively intact, but it was too late to do anything about it.

Slipping through the portal, he escaped just in time to feel the god's internal world collapse along with his body, releasing a violent shockwave that rattled Tiberius' bones. Since Percy had already established that sound was incapable of crossing the void, it had to be a ripple in the very fabric of space that had nearly pulverized them.

Scanning the spot that the deity's corpse had occupied a moment prior, Percy only found a single object nearly small enough to fit in his host's palm: a dandelion-like plant with a stem that branched out into a pair of mint-coloured pappi.

Realizing that the affinity-changing treasure was all that had remained of not only Julius' internal world and body but also the corpses of the other mortals, Percy couldn't help but swallow hard.

‘I suppose it’ll grant the air affinity to a maximum of two people,’ Micky speculated. ‘One for each consumed pappus.’

Percy mentally nodded. It was probably the affinity-changing treasure with the fewest uses that he had ever seen, and he doubted that it would last for longer than a week. It wasn’t all that surprising, since the duration and number of charges were correlated with the strength of a deity. If anything, he should consider himself lucky that Julius’ death had even generated one, since Kassorith had mentioned that it wasn’t guaranteed.

Snatching the magical plant, Percy stored it in his seal for now. He still wanted to participate in the auction if possible, so the treasure might not even last until his return to Remior. If Tiberius or his remaining comrades wanted it, Percy wouldn’t mind giving it up, but that was a problem for later.

‘Come on. We’re not safe yet,’ he said, releasing multiple bursts of willpower to propel himself away just like he’d done for the corpse.

The good news was that Tiberius had inherited the inertial frame of the fallen deity, so he’d been flying away from the centre of the battlefield from the moment he’d emerged from the rift. He was also much lighter than the god, so Percy had an even easier time accelerating. Only once did a giant fireball fly toward them, but the mountain-sized projectile that had carried them this far luckily shielded them from the deadly spell.

Once Percy and his host were far enough, the former exhaled in relief as the latter reoriented himself to watch the battle while drifting backwards, clearly anxious to know whether his people would survive.

The gods were too small to make out from that distance, so Percy could only tell that the fight was still raging on due to the flashes of azure, orange and brown mana littering the void.

‘Which ones are yours?’ he asked.

‘Water and one of the earth users,’ Tiberius replied.

‘Did none of your gods ascend with composite affinities?’

‘Some of our most talented demigods are given affinity-changing treasures nowadays, but that wasn’t an option a hundred thousand years ago: when our mentors attained divinity.’

Percy nodded in understanding. Saying nothing else, he discarded chunks of willpower in the opposite direction to slow his host down, so that they wouldn’t drift too far away from their only means of leaving this place.

Around half an hour later, the orange flashes died out completely, indicating that at least one of the remaining bandits had either fled or been killed. At roughly the same time, the azure flashes also happened to grow scarcer. The deity with the water affinity was still alive, but they must have been injured seriously.

Estimating that the fight would conclude one way or the other within the next few minutes, Percy began accelerating toward the battlefield again, hoping to get noticed by the allied gods.

When the remaining deities stopped producing spells, Percy and Tiberius worked together to fly even more quickly toward them, releasing indigo bolts of lightning from their own core to hopefully capture the gods’ attention. It would be a disaster for Percy if it was the space bandit with the earth affinity who had survived, but even getting captured by a hostile deity might be better for Tiberius than being stranded in the middle of nowhere.

As seconds turned into minutes without anybody coming to pick them or the affinity-changing treasure up, the worst-case scenario started looking more and more likely. An hour later, Percy and his host were forced to accept their grim reality: they were alone in outer space, billions: if not trillions: of kilometres away from civilization!

Chapter 718: Outer space

‘How did this even happen?!’ Percy complained, though the question was mostly aimed at himself rather than his host. ‘They’re gods! How the hell did they manage to miss us?!’

Despite his outburst, he honestly understood the reason. Tiberius had remained hidden inside his mentor’s internal world for most of the battle, so nobody had expected him to still be alive.

The bursts of willpower that Percy had used to propel Julius' corpse away from the warzone had been small, invisible, and short-lived, making it difficult for a group of deities engrossed in a dangerous fight to notice them. Even if the gods had caught a glimpse of the drifting body, they would have attributed its erratic flight to the forces exerted on it by their own attacks.

By the time the mortal had emerged from his collapsing bubble of relative safety, he'd been in the outskirts of the battlefield and concealed behind enormous stone constructs. When the chaos had calmed down enough for Percy and Tiberius to reveal their existence, they had been located too far away for their pitiful, mortal efforts to capture the attention of their would-be saviours.

The surviving deities probably hadn't expected Julius to produce an affinity-changing treasure either: certainly not one valuable enough to warrant scouring the desolate vastness of outer space for.

'Should we have tried to signal with my lightning mana sooner?' the Violet asked, his tone laced with bitterness.

'Maybe,' Percy replied, genuinely unsure. 'It could have easily backfired by getting us obliterated or kidnapped by the bandits.'

Either way, there was no point in lamenting what could have been. The gods had clearly left the area, heading either to the auction, back to their planet, or off to harass more travelling deities: depending on their identities. Percy and Tiberius would have to play the hand they'd been dealt.

'Hey, at least we don't have to worry about our own survival anymore,' Micky privately consoled his fellow aspect.

It might be a callous thing to say, but the Huehuan wasn't wrong. Even if he failed to reach the auction, Percy could always ditch his host and return safely to Remior. The idea of leaving Tiberius alone to die didn't sit well with Percy, but he still wasn't willing to budge on his decision to stay away from the Vault, so he would have to figure out a third option.

Besides, part of him welcomed the opportunity to spend a few days adrift in outer space. One of his main reasons for having dreamt of attaining divinity his whole life had been his desire to explore the universe with his own power. His bloodline had already made that possible in some ways, but the idea of travelling anywhere he wanted with an actual, physical body held a certain charm.

Paying closer attention to his surroundings, Percy suddenly found the endless void a little unsettling. Distant suns shone everywhere he looked, making them appear deceptively within reach, but he understood that Remior was but a speck of dust compared to the mindboggling stretch of emptiness separating his host from the stars.

Percy had travelled to other planets before, but he'd always done that either in his disembodied state: capable of flying at unimaginable speeds and free of fleshly needs: or through divine magic. He'd experienced plenty of hostile environments as well, yet even the crushing pressure of the Atlantean ocean or the bloodthirsty jungle of Takeo's world felt almost welcoming compared to the pure nothingness that currently enveloped him.

The good news was that surviving in the void wasn't as difficult as he had imagined. The cold and the lack of pressure were admittedly quite annoying, but a Violet's body was resilient enough to endure it all. The biggest issue was the absence of oxygen, water or food. Percy had the first two taken care of due to his connection to Remior, and he had enough rations inside his seal to last for weeks.

'Do you know where the nearest planet is, by any chance?' he asked.

'No, but it doesn't really matter. I doubt it's closer than a couple of lightyears away, and we'll never travel that far,' Tiberius explained grimly.

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'Lightyears?' Percy had never heard that term before.

'As the word implies, it's the distance light can travel in a year. The exact unit of measurement varies depending on how long years are for the faction doing the counting, but it's a popular tool because nothing can move faster than light: normally speaking. Well… souls can, but that's not very helpful to us at the moment. Due to the lack of air resistance, if we keep propelling ourselves in the same direction, we will eventually approach the speed of light, but we won't be able to surpass it. Neighbouring stars are typically separated by a few lightyears, while galaxies can be tens or hundreds of thousands of lightyears across.'

That… didn't sound right.

‘What about gods? I’ve been carried through outer space before, and the trip only lasted a few months,’ Percy protested, recalling his journey to the void tournament with Lanthaniel. Marador Prime couldn’t have been that close to the Vault.

‘The same rule applies to gods if they propel themselves the old-fashioned way. Even if they pour a hundred times more energy into their flight than us, they’ll only accelerate faster and get a little closer to the speed of light,’ Tiberius insisted. ‘But they have a way around the problem.’

‘Compressing space?’ Percy guessed.

His host nodded. ‘Every deity has the strength and knowledge to do that to an extent, because that’s precisely what keeps their internal world tucked neatly inside their body. Compressing the space in front of them is a better application of power, as it allows them to effectively travel several times faster than light, even though they aren’t technically doing that. Obviously, stronger gods can achieve greater degrees of compression, and those with the space affinity can apply the technique far more efficiently.’

‘Any chance we can manage something similar?’

‘None,’ Tiberius declared, shooting Percy’s hopes down. ‘We simply lack the raw power necessary for it. A skilled demigod with a space affinity might be able to pull it off briefly, but I’m sure you’ve already noticed the second problem that makes mortals ill-equipped to traverse the cosmos.’

Percy had: there was barely any ambient mana here. It wouldn’t be impossible to refill their core, but it would probably take several hours. They would have to use their limited reserves carefully: not that the Violet’s lightning mana would be very helpful in traversing the endless void. Deities weren’t as affected by their environment, since their internal worlds passively generated mana of their affinities.

Before Percy had a chance to say anything else, his host frowned, seemingly noticing something strange. ‘Now that you mention it, you haven’t explained where you’re pulling all this air mana from.’

Percy shrugged. ‘My main body. I can get you some water mana as well if you get thirsty.’

He didn’t bother offering to borrow space mana from Nesha, as he ultimately agreed with Tiberius that it wouldn’t be a viable strategy. Freeing up a clone from his relatives to possess his girlfriend wouldn’t be difficult, but he’d never managed to fuse soul mana to another rare affinity: only to common and composite elements.

Even if he made it work, the clone in Nesha’s body would have to pass the new resource to his own body before sending it to Tiberius, which would greatly lower the efficiency of the transmission.

Finally, his girlfriend was merely a Green. Percy might be able to accelerate his borrowed body to a respectable fraction of the speed of light if he kept at it for a few hours or days: however long it took: and he could even potentially compress the space in front of Tiberius by a handful of times if he managed to replicate Nesha’s spells, but it would still take several months of constant effort to reach the nearest solar system.

His supplies wouldn’t last that long. If that wasn’t bad enough, the cord was currently clogged up by the flow of air mana, so transmitting both resources for an extended period of time wouldn’t be easy.

‘What about our runes?’ Micky asked, still keeping his existence hidden from Tiberius, probably due to being too lazy to introduce himself properly.

Percy considered his friend’s suggestion. Magiscript was indeed a mortal’s best bet at travelling between worlds without assistance from a god. It should be possible to build some sort of airtight spaceship that would recycle resources, store and consume large amounts of fuel, and achieve the necessary acceleration and spatial compression automatically. Wasn’t that exactly what the Vault of Magic or the Void Hand’s space station were?

Percy was sure that he would meet the requirements for interstellar flight if he waited until he reached the Concept realm. Even if he failed to incorporate all his elements into his internal world, he could prioritize Micky’s ice affinity for the ability to generate air and water. However, he didn’t want to have to wait thousands of years or rely on others to explore the universe with his own body.

‘We’ll try creating something like that one day,’ he promised his fellow aspect. ‘Unfortunately, it’s not the sort of thing we can piece together on the spot.’

It also wouldn't hurt to get an aspect or mana core with a space affinity in the future, but that would have to be weighed against the opportunity cost of picking other rare elements, since all of them seemed extremely interesting and useful.

Having considered every possibility, Percy was certain that they wouldn't be able to return to civilization with their own strength. Their only hope was still to get rescued by a deity, so they would have to focus their efforts on getting noticed.

Chapter 719: The hitchhiker's guide to the universe

While Tiberius' kinsmen were long gone, there should be other deities travelling to the auction. Grabbing their attention wouldn't be easy, but that was still the simplest part of Percy's plan.

What came after being found promised to be far more troublesome, as there was no way to eliminate the risk of being captured by another group of space bandits. Even gods from a proper world weren't guaranteed to treat Percy's host fairly. The Sapphire Pavilion technically didn't allow the attendees of their auctions to harm each other, but would anyone know or care if a mortal got squashed like a bug in the middle of nowhere?

'We'll have to give them a reason to help, and eliminate any reason to hurt us,' Percy told his host.

If he decided to go all out, there were many rewards he could offer that would entice pretty much any deity in the universe to at least hear him out. The secret of the cyan powder would be priceless to a lesser spring, while his boosting art and the ability to pass the Moirais' Decree to a large number of mortals would incite greed even in the representatives of a peak faction.

The problem was choosing which of his secrets would be the least damaging to share, and to incentivize the gods to transport Tiberius safely to the auction instead of just killing him after extracting everything of value.

'I'm leaning toward the cyan powder,' Micky suggested. 'The other things can strengthen even the most powerful worlds, while a faster means of advancement is more relevant to lesser springs and mid-tier greater springs like Thess'kala.'

Percy mentally indicated his agreement. An argument could be made that the Moirais' Decree could only affect a finite number of people, but it would require additional clones to be compromised and might lead to Percy directly provoking the wrath of the strongest faction in the universe.

Producing another greater spring wasn't ideal either: he'd resisted selling the secret to Metatron for so long: but not every deity treated their mortals as cruelly as the pentapus, and Percy had already technically given the secret away to a few of his past hosts like Enki.

More importantly, a random lesser spring gaining the ability to keep pace with Remior's development was unlikely to affect Percy's people. It would be millennia before either faction reaped the benefits of the priceless resource, and the two species might even be located too far apart to ever interact with one another.

New greater springs emerged every few thousand years anyway, so Percy's actions wouldn't change the cosmic order that much. He also needed something valuable to trade at the auction, so he might as well sell the same item to multiple interested parties.

'Keep in mind that we might still lose this clone,' Percy warned.

He was pretty sure that the peak factions actively worked to prevent the secret from leaking, otherwise others would have thought of selling it for ridiculous sums of money. Hell, the leaders of the Void Hand clearly didn't want even the weaker members of their own alliance to learn the secret, so selling it at a public auction was going to be extremely dangerous.

Hopefully, the Sapphire Pavilion wouldn't allow anyone to act against them within their premises, but Percy would have to investigate whether there was an option for selling items anonymously, to avoid implicating his host.

The precautions he and Micky had set up with Kerfyl's Decree gave him some confidence in taking the risk, but he had to mentally prepare himself for the very real possibility of this version of him dying.

'I understand,' the Huehuan said with a solemn mental nod.

Having made his mind up, Percy pulled a rectangular grey slab out of his seal and asked his main body to mix some phantom mana with the air mana he was supplying through the cord. After receiving the new resource, the clone carved a few simple enchantments on the smooth frontal surface of the learning aid, before snapping it in half and pouring mana into the controlled self-repairs on the back as well.

Tiberius' eyes widened in shock as he watched the fragments regenerate into identical copies of the original construct, but he didn't interrupt, clearly curious to see what mysterious technique his spectral guest would show him next.

Percy replicated the slabs as quickly as the pitiful trickle of phantom mana would allow, eventually generating a towering stack hundreds of pieces tall. He had to envelop the constructs with his domain to prevent them from drifting away.

'Mind explaining what you're trying to do?' Tiberius asked, clearly unable to endure his saviour's silence any longer.

'These are illumination, lightning resonance, and amplification runes respectively,' Percy laconically said, letting his host mull over the plan by himself.

He'd chosen weaker but more versatile variants for the enchantments, to ensure that they could be fuelled by mana of any affinity and any mage: not just their creator. He could have drawn more potent runes by restricting them to Tiberius' lightning mana: since that was what Percy was going to activate the final formation with: but refilling his host's reserves multiple times in this environment would take a while. The auction might finish before he was done. It was faster to prepare the objects with phantom mana and only provide them with lightning mana later.

Once he had enough constructs, he spread them out in a wide, flat area with his domain, arranging them into even larger runes joined together into a four-layered formation. With everything in place, he poured his host's mana into the enchantments, causing the whole structure to light up.

Tiberius had failed to capture the attention of his kinsmen earlier, but there was a massive difference between the basic indigo flashes he had released by himself and the output of Percy's intricate formation. The multiple layers of amplification and lightning resonance runes greatly empowered the effect of the Violet's mana, while the illumination runes converted every drop of that power into light.

Not satisfied with just that, Percy approached the problem more methodically than before. Instead of a single, continuous glow, he employed numerous short-lived bursts to create a blinking signal. His host's limited reserves would last longer this way, the individual flashes would be even brighter, and the rhythmic contrast between light and darkness would raise the odds of somebody noticing the artificial nature of the signal.

As a final failsafe, Percy fed phantom mana into his host's core, converting it to lightning. Due to the soul mana present within the resource, it wasn't as efficient as regular pure mana, nor was Percy particularly skilled in generating lightning mana, because the most recent clone in Nephthys body had yet to share his memories with the original and the other clones.

Due to his lower grade and the additional losses incurred during the transmission, Percy was unable to fully keep up with his host's consumption, but his efforts still allowed him to take fewer and shorter breaks.

'Thank you for doing this,' Tiberius said a few hours later, during one of those breaks. 'I've no idea if I'll survive, but this is the first time anyone's gone to such lengths to help me.'

Percy shrugged. 'No need to thank me. Like I said, my original plan was to catch a glimpse of the gods' battle, grab the affinity-changing treasure and leave. If you hadn't mentioned the auction, you would have probably been dead by now.'

The affinity-changing treasure in question was still inside Percy's seal. Perhaps it would be wiser to just give up on the auction and bring the dandelion back to Remior to strengthen a couple of his allies. The Sapphire Pavilion had lots of branches, so it might not be impossible to attend another auction in the future. However, Percy had no idea how long it would take, nor did he have any other viable leads for extending his lifespan and activating his third core.

Since the two-stemmed plant was unlikely to last that long, Percy didn't mind giving one of its two uses to his host: it would even serve as a permanent memento for the man to remember his deceased mentor by. Percy had held off, because changing his host's affinity to sound would make the formation more difficult to use.

'The fact remains that I'm only alive right now because of you,' Tiberius insisted, though he kept it at that.

Resuming his efforts, Percy continued pumping phantom mana into his host's core and lightning mana into the enchantments for several hours: or had they crossed into days already?

For the longest time, their surroundings remained perfectly unchanging, making Percy doubt that there was even anyone still travelling nearby. Perhaps this was an unpopular route, or everyone had already reached the venue of the auction. It was also entirely possible that the signal was still too weak to reach the nearest deity.

Throughout the operation, he and his spectral companions hadn't stopped bouncing ideas off one another, trying to come up with a backup plan, but they hadn't managed to think of anything even remotely viable.

It wasn't until after Percy's main body informed the clone that he'd been feeding him air and phantom mana for three days straight that something finally changed: a slender, long-necked humanoid covered in short yellow fur popped out of nowhere, floating a few dozen metres away and examining Tiberius curiously.

Chapter 720: Patchy translations and airtight contracts

The first thing Percy did upon noticing the newcomer was to will his constructs to shatter, scattering the grey powder in the void. While he was open to the idea of sharing the secret of Crystallization if necessary, there was no reason to let the god floating before him know about the Vault's magiscript as well. Luckily, the yellow-furred deity appeared too busy trying to make heads or tails of Tiberius' unlikely survival to so much as glance at the destroyed formation.

Without warning, a tapestry of colours exploded out of the god's chest, spreading in every direction as if it were some sort of three-dimensional painting being drawn in real time. The starlit void was replaced by an opaque orange background that enveloped Percy's host in less than a second, complete with the acrid stench of sulfur and a wave of suffocating heat. Dozens of metres beneath the Violet's feet, a bubbling lake of lava was growing and expanding outwards at the same rate as the sky.

'Did he pull us into his internal world?' Percy wondered, though he immediately realized that couldn't be it.

He hadn't felt being transported like when Lanthaniel had let him into or out of his internal world. More importantly, there was no impenetrable boundary blocking Percy's senses: just a thin, amorphous membrane of space that his Sage's Pond could easily penetrate.

‘Rather than sending us inside his internal world, he must have projected a part of it onto reality,’ Micky concluded. ‘I suppose that this ability is just an extension of how we mortals use our domains.’

The deity’s actions caused Tiberius’ shoulders to tense. Percy couldn’t blame his host for being wary of a potentially hostile god, but he wasn’t nearly as worried as the Violet. Had the Concept mage wished them harm, there would have been no need for theatrics. He could have killed them in an instant, or just ignored them and waited for starvation to finish the job.

Summoning a bulky apparatus out of nowhere, the deity donned it on his head. It looked like a cube-shaped helmet made of bronze, densely engraved with runes that Percy didn’t recognize. Brushing a palm lined with four long, bony digits over the left side of the object, the god illuminated some of the strange symbols, activating the enchantments.

“Thepp tar… mortal… jerr temes… air to breathe?” the god asked, making Percy understand why the deity had shrouded them with his internal world: they wouldn’t be able to speak without an atmosphere.

What Percy didn’t understand, was what exactly the god had said. Even Tiberius creased his brow in confusion, clearly unable to offer any insight. Percy had to ponder over the nonsensical question for several seconds before he realized what the bulky object was.

‘Is that abomination on his head a translation device? It barely works…’

Perhaps, Percy’s past experiences had spoiled him. Language barriers were probably a common problem across the universe, though Percy had never been affected by it too badly.

He could understand his hosts just fine due to their connection, and the translation device that Metatron had given him was more than good enough for every other situation. It was several times smaller and less intrusive than the yellow-furred god’s helmet, yet was far more effective at its job.

The pentapus’ handiwork could seamlessly translate even between pairs of languages that couldn’t possibly be stored in the Vault’s database. Nephthys had used it to talk to Percy’s main body right after her rebirth, even though Metatron was hopefully unaware of Remior or Amenthes.

Even on Marador Prime, speaking to members of other races hadn't been a problem for Percy and Kassorith, as every faction affiliated with the Void Hand spoke the same standardized language. Evidently, lesser springs with underdeveloped branches of runecrafting weren't able to produce devices that functioned nearly as flawlessly.

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'I hope the Sapphire Pavilion has a better model, otherwise getting through the auction will be a chore…'

"It's my bloodline," Percy replied through his host's lips, unwilling to keep the god waiting. "It allows me to generate small amounts of elemental mana."

This obviously wasn't the full extent of what his bloodline was capable of, but the long-necked god didn't need to know that. With his curiosity satisfied, the deity turned around to leave, prompting Percy to shout. "Wait! You can't abandon me here! My mentor was killed by space bandits and I can't reach civilization by myself!"

The deity paused for the briefest of instants, before shrugging. "Not my problem… Allthar me loog… mortal from a potentially hostile faction? Bez kalar Sapphire Pavilion… not allowed to harm you directly… sirit flagg el… no obligation to help either."

Percy gritted his borrowed teeth. Part of him had hoped to hitch a ride to the auction for free, but it looked like he would have to part with one of his secrets after all.

"I can pay!" he hurriedly said, not wanting the god to leave his host stranded again. Replacing the formation would be an absolute pain in the ass, while the odds of getting noticed a second time would only decrease as the time of the auction drew nearer and most attendees arrived at the venue.

The deity turned back to look at Tiberius, an amused smirk plastered over his pale lips. "What payment… thepp lar… mortal possibly offer?"

Percy sighed, knowing that there was no going back now. “A method for mortals to cleanse their cores twice as fast. It can turn your world into a greater spring.”

The god’s smile froze as his eyes narrowed. “You’re lying. Even if you are not, this is too dangerous a secret to learn from an outsider… althar vok romek… blabbermouth telling everyone at the auction… semek laft har… bring trouble to my people.”

“Nobody will know that I sold you this information!” Percy protested. “I have a Decree that will bind us both to our word. You just have to swear to escort me safely to the auction and to do everything in your power to avoid leaking the secret I’m about to share in the next hundred thousand years. In return, I’ll say that you helped me purely out of kindness if anyone asks.”

The god didn’t reply immediately, but that was probably for the best. It meant that he was at least considering Percy’s offer. The good news was that the god was travelling alone, otherwise Percy might have had to convince multiple deities.

‘He’s obviously stronger than the ones who were escorting Tiberius,’ Micky noted.

The yellow-furred deity had only revealed a tiny slice of his internal world, but he had clearly ascended with a lava affinity. Even if he was merely at the bottom of the Self-Discovery stage, he’d still comprehended more concepts than the gods from earlier, and judging by his confidence and the sheer quality of his internal world, Percy had a hunch that the god was closer to the peak of that stage.

A minute later, the long-necked man nodded, much to the mortals’ elation. Before agreeing to Percy’s terms, he asked a few follow-up questions to clear up a couple of details that the patchy translation had omitted, but they were able to finalize the deal not long after that.

‘Kerfyl’s Decree is the gift that keeps on giving,’ Percy told his fellow aspect, once again feeling happy with his decision to pick the utility ability over an offensive alternative on Maradion. Sure, he had failed to end Machaon’s life in the Whistling Woods, but the soul contracts had completely revolutionized the lives of both his clones and main body. This was already the third time he had used it in this very trip.

Withdrawing his internal world, the yellow-furred deity dragged Tiberius and his spectral guests into his body, dumping them above a much larger lake of lava. Scanning the whole pocket of space, Percy

noticed that it was shaped like a proper sphere, nearly two kilometres wide, bounded by a thick dimensional wall that completely blocked his senses.

More importantly, the place wasn't empty.

A few islands of solid stone floated atop the surface of the roiling magma, with a group of four Violets and two Blues chatting on the widest piece of land. A Violet and a Blue were leisurely releasing air mana from their palms, presumably to fill the internal world with enough oxygen for everyone: including their god: while a second Violet was using his ice affinity to cool their surroundings to keep them comfortable.

Percy briefly considered whether it was a good idea to socialize with his fellow mortals. On one hand, they appeared to hail from a more developed faction than his host's, so they might have additional information to share about the auction. On the other, the more he talked to any of these people, the greater the risk would be to reveal additional secrets that he wasn't ready to share.

In the end, his curiosity won over his caution, leading him to approach. The contract was already set in stone, so their god wouldn't be able to harm Tiberius regardless of what he said. The long-necked sapients had no choice but to safely deliver Percy's host to the branch of the Sapphire Pavilion.