Wanderer 731

Chapter 731 – Strength of a Concept mage

Percy had spoken softly, knowing that the deity could easily hear him. She obviously wasn't physically present inside her internal world, but she was perfectly aware of everything happening within it.

"Are you familiar with the peak factions' system for measuring a mage's fighting strength?" Aje asked, her voice echoing from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Percy nodded. "A newly promoted deity with a single common element would be an Eleventh Circle mage, right?"

"Correct," the goddess confirmed. "Branching out into a new element adds another circle – or grade, depending on how you choose to think about it – as does mastering all the available concepts of an existing element."

"Does each element have the same number of concepts?"

"Four," Aje said. "The first is the foundational concept necessary to add the mana type into one's internal world, while the other three are auxiliary concepts – the same ones that a god's children can inherit as blessings, or that mortals and deities can extract from a Ring of Sacrilege. Mastering just one or two of the auxiliary concepts still helps, but the benefit is much smaller than perfecting the element."

Percy pondered over the implications, quickly identifying a problem. "But there are so many combinations of common affinities – thirty-one by the time one reaches the end of Elemental Acquisition, if I'm not mistaken. If every element raises your grade when you first obtain it, and a second time once you complete it, wouldn't a god at the peak of that stage be something like a Seventy-Second Circle mage?"

"Not exactly," the goddess replied. "For common elements and their combinations, quality is far more important than quantity. A deity's grade only increases when they comprehend their first composite affinity, the first three-element combination, and so on. Additional common elements are merely the prerequisites for the more complex affinities."

“So, somebody at the peak of Elemental Acquisition who possesses no rare affinities will ‘only’ be a Twentieth Circle mage?”

The goddess chuckled. “Sort of, but that’s still nothing to scoff at. Grades in the Concept realm scale exponentially, just like they do for mortals, so the difference between a Twentieth Circle mage and an Eleventh Circle mage is even larger than that separating a Brown insect from a demigod. Also, there are a few additional factors to consider.”

“Such as?”

“Internal worlds grow passively over time, even if their owner never bothers to master new concepts.”

Percy recalled Phoebe mentioning something similar. “Doesn’t that mean that younger gods can never catch up to deities who are millions of years old – even if they possess more affinities?”

“They can,” Aje said. “Gods only gain a free grade about once every million years, and they are limited to a maximum of three using this method, for reasons that I won’t get into right now. It helps, but everyone gets stuck at roughly the same baseline after mastering all the common elements, so the number of rare affinities still plays a major role. Those elements all contribute separately, regardless of how many a god has comprehended.”

Running a few mental calculations in his borrowed head, Percy estimated that the likes of Aje and Lanthaniel – who he estimated to be younger than a million years old – were Fourteenth Circle mages, as they had fully mastered their first common element and their first composite element.

Julius – his host’s deceased mentor – on the other hand, had only been an Eleventh Circle mage, since he had ascended with a single common element and hadn’t even mastered it.

Nephthys had probably been a Twelfth Circle mage at the height of her power, as she had also attained divinity with a single element – albeit a rare one – yet had managed to fully flesh it out.

Meanwhile, Phoebe had to be an Eighteenth Circle mage. She had mastered the mind affinity and two common elements, yet she had only comprehended her third – without completing it. Furthermore, she had certainly lived for well over a million years, but Percy didn’t think that she had reached two.

Someone like Ishkuria would have to be either a Twenty-Second or Twenty-Third Circle mage. The complete mastery of the five common elements and all their combinations had guaranteed the first twenty circles of strength, and Percy was sure that she had lived for longer than two million years, though he didn't know whether she had reached three.

"What about the strongest gods in the universe? It should currently be those who have reached the peak of Elemental Acquisition after ascending with a single rare element, right?" Percy asked, estimating their ceiling to be around the Twenty-Fifth Circle.

"That's a close enough guess, but it ignores two other factors: external concepts and people who can punch up. Don't forget that this is ultimately a system for classifying a person's fighting strength," Aje corrected him.

He didn't interrupt, waiting for the goddess to elaborate.

"External concepts don't come in bundles like those tied to certain affinities. Each directly elevates a god's strength by a single circle," the Gallimian deity explained.

Percy frowned, realizing that he didn't know enough about the topic to calculate the strength of the most powerful gods accurately. He had only heard of external concepts related to magiscript and alchemy, but the former had only been comprehended by Metatron, and the latter was still hypothetical.

"What about gods who can punch up? How much of a gap do the best of them close?" he asked.

"Three circles – pretty much the same that the most powerful mortals can manage. In fact, it's usually the same mages who used to be called 'paragons' in the Colour realm that might maintain their advantage after their apotheosis – depending on the source of their strength," Aje explained.

Taking the new information into account, Percy tried to revise his estimates to the best of his ability. Assuming that the peak factions had a former paragon at the pinnacle of Elemental Acquisition, and that the same person had ascended with a rare affinity before eventually mastering an external concept as well, they would qualify as a Twenty-Ninth Circle mage.

This should roughly be the current ceiling – give or take a step or two – until the strongest deities with two rare affinities managed to surpass the current leaders of the Moirai and the Void Hand, touching the Thirty-First Circle. If the stars aligned, Zurvanai might even make it all the way to the Thirty-Third Circle – thanks to Percy.

'That's insane,' Micky noted. 'To them, even somebody like Ishkuria would be no different from an ant. And there is a similar gap between Ishkuria and Lanthaniel or Aje.'

Percy nodded grimly, realizing that the Concept realm spanned a far vaster range of power than the Colour realm. And that was without anybody even approaching its theoretical ceiling. What if someone were to master every rare affinity and external concept in existence?

However, he also felt somewhat content in the knowledge that he might be able to leapfrog over several grades with his own apotheosis. Just comprehending all the elements that he, Micky, and Nephthys currently possessed would boost his strength by something ridiculous – like six circles – in an instant.

That was without even mastering his affinities, acquiring new ones, or taking any other boosts like the Focus that he was going to commission into account. There were simply way too many avenues to keep raising his strength as a deity…

"What about the size of an internal world?" he asked, pivoting to an adjacent topic.

"Ignoring gods who can punch up, every other boost that I have mentioned roughly doubles the internal world's diameter per circle, while the volume and mana capacity increases by a factor of eight. A deity's strength still only triples though, much like the difference between mortal grades. That's because only the quantity of a god's mana goes up, while its quality remains stuck at the same level as a demigod's."

That more or less aligned with Percy's observations about the internal worlds he had visited, with one exception. "I couldn't help but notice that yours is a little larger than it's supposed to be, based on everything else you have said. Is it because of the stronger domain that you had during your ascension?"

"Yes. Obatala created his Decree with the intention of giving our people access to a certain external concept. Our potent willpower is just a manifestation of that effort, though none of us has managed to

fully comprehend it. Thankfully, the incomplete concept still elevates our strength by roughly half a grade."

Percy suddenly found himself quite interested in talking to the titan about this. His main body had produced an even more powerful domain after his fusion with Micky, so he couldn't help but think that he was closer to mastering the external concept Aje was talking about than the Gallimians.

"Final question: what's up with the pure affinity? I was told that it works a bit like a rare element, but that doesn't explain why everyone is trying their best to get rid of it."

He didn't want to keep pestering the Gallimian goddess as she'd already given him plenty to think about, but he couldn't contain his curiosity. This was important information that would determine what he should do with his second core.

"That's mostly correct. The issue is that the pure affinity seems to be missing an auxiliary concept – nobody has ever managed to comprehend more than two, which leads to a couple of additional problems. The strongest pure deities fall something like half a grade short of those with rare elements. That's not necessarily the end of the world in and of itself, but entering the Elemental Acquisition stage with an unstable internal world makes it significantly more difficult to progress through it."

"If their internal world is unstable, isn't that proof that the final auxiliary concept exists?" Percy asked, pointing out the most logical explanation.

"Clearly," Aje conceded. "But that hasn't helped anyone to discover it. Demigods with the pure affinity always face a difficult choice," she said, not bothering to elaborate.

She didn't have to, as the paths stretching before such mages were obvious enough. They could acquire a common or composite affinity before ascending, to make their life easier at the cost of lowering their eventual ceiling as gods. Alternatively, they could keep the pure affinity anyway, which in theory would raise their ceiling by a grade and a half. In practice, it might end up stinting their growth even more severely.

Finally, they could acquire a proper rare affinity, maintaining an even higher ceiling without the added difficulty. It was the only "good" solution, assuming that their faction was rich enough to pamper them.

‘Well… damn. I’ve still got no idea what the right answer is,’ Percy admitted to his fellow aspect.

Giving up on the pure affinity felt like a mistake, since he wouldn’t be able to acquire those concepts later. On the flip side, keeping it would make his entire journey in the Concept realm much harder than it had to be. Replacing it with a rare affinity was obviously better as he currently was, but he didn’t know how many additional cores or aspects he might have by the time he was ready for his apotheosis.

Percy and Micky discussed the matter from every possible angle over the next few days, though they were no closer to a decision when Tiberius informed them that he had awakened a metal affinity, nor when Aje alerted them to the fact that they had reached Gallimus.

Chapter 732 – Studying mutations

“No matter how many times I see you assume that form, it’s always going to send a chill down my spine,” Nesha said, instinctively taking a step back before Micky was even done transforming.

The other people sitting in the living room fared even worse. The Blues of House Etna flinched back at the frightening sight of the towering Thess’kalan, visibly shuddering every time Micky’s forked tongue escaped his lips. His grey scales probably hadn’t helped either – Micky hadn’t bothered to alter the colour of his body, since he didn’t care about perfecting the illusion.

Even Galahad, who was probably strong enough to hold his own against the real Kassorith, and who had also seen Micky transform into Percy’s former host a couple of times before, couldn’t help but tense up.

The only one who remained entirely unbothered was Percy himself. It would have been strange for him to feel even a pang of fear after having lived in that person’s scaled skin for several months – especially when he was powerful enough to crush the bastard with ease.

Micky couldn’t help but roll his slit eyes. He’d found the reaction funny the first couple of times, but it was quickly starting to irritate him. “You don’t have to stare at me if it bothers you so much,” he said, an inadvertent hiss seeping into his tone. “Just go about your business and let me worry about mine.”

‘At least she’s not mad at me anymore,’ he thought to himself, recalling the jabs and snide comments that Percy’s girlfriend had directed at him over the past couple of weeks.

It wasn't Micky's fault that he and his fellow aspect received the same notifications!

The twelve mages had gathered inside Percy's residence in the settlement for a very specific purpose. Archibald had tasked his son with escorting their guests to the Guild to receive their gifts, so that Percy wouldn't have to go out of his way to meet every new batch. The acid mage arguably had better things to do than act as a glorified errand boy for his nephew, but there was sadly nobody better for the job.

The visiting mages were unlikely to stir trouble, but it didn't hurt to have a powerful mage accompanying them – ready to rein them in if they tried anything funny before being bound by the terms of the spectral contract. Percy could obviously handle them just fine so long as they remained in his presence, but not during the first part of their trip. According to Nesha, Archibald, and Orin, it was also politically savvy to have a high-ranking member of the alliance tend to their guests' needs, lest the pampered nobles took offense at House Avalon's perceived negligence.

Percy was obviously needed to possess the Blues and grant them their new cores and mutations, as well as have them sign the contracts. Nesha, on the other hand, was here to catch any subtle falsehoods that the guests might foolishly try to speak, and double-check that the terms her boyfriend demanded of his hosts were airtight.

Micky was the only one whose presence had nothing to do with strengthening the alliance. He had taken a break from his practice with the Shapeshifting Sentries spell solely for his and Percy's benefit.

His fellow aspect placed a clone inside the first mage, while also dumping a pile of green mushrooms onto the noble to awaken the new core, and a much shorter stack of red powder by the man's feet, prompting him to start consuming it.

They had tried to simplify the process as much as possible, which was why the guests would have to clear out their new channels in their own time, and receive an appropriate combination of affinity-changing treasures from Galahad's subordinates later.

Well… that last part might have to wait a few hours, since the clone wasn't back from Gallimus yet. He'd already informed the main body that he wouldn't stay too long, since the lesser spring didn't have any new alchemic principles or other particularly useful tidbits of magical knowledge to share.

Obatala had apparently expressed his desire to have a meeting with Percy at some point, and Micky knew that his friend wouldn't mind chatting with the titan about the ins and outs of his Decree, but this would have to wait until a future visit, since the god was currently busy with other matters. After leaving a mark on the planet, the clone had bid his host and travelling companions farewell and was already on the way back.

Either way, the activation of the Moirais' Decree had to happen during the nobles' possession, otherwise they would need mind as well as life mana. The consumption of the ruby dust, too, had to happen in the clone's presence, since the Mimicry trait would be needed to suppress the side-effects of the mutation.

The acquisition of the mutation was precisely what Micky was here to observe.

Ignoring all the other steps, he willed his Sage's Pond to shrink by thousands of times, enveloping the noble's body and trying to pierce through the few centimetres of skin and flesh that concealed his skeleton. Focusing every sliver of attention onto the man's bones, Micky observed the microscopic changes that began to take place inside their very structure.

This wasn't the first time he was witnessing the transformation – not by a long shot. The versions of Micky that existed inside the clones had brought back countless bundles of memories of acquiring the mutation from within all sorts of human or non-human bodies. Micky and Percy hadn't stopped at that, opting to observe the process from the outside too, finding the additional perspective valuable.

That said, Micky had yet to consume the crimson powder with his main body. In fact, he was the only one among Percy's closest allies who had deliberately avoided doing that.

There was no doubt that the substance would work on him just fine, as his magical flesh had already proven capable of replicating any biological function. If Micky were to consume the material, the most likely outcome would be his bones absorbing and adapting to it, allowing him to imitate its properties even when regenerating limbs or shapeshifting into different forms.

They'd only held off due to having more ambitious plans for the powder.

The decision had come at the cost of keeping Micky a little weaker than he could have been. Perhaps, his reinforced bones would have given him the slight edge that he and his fellow aspect had needed to

take down Machaon a few weeks earlier. However, this was a unique opportunity to study the process of acquiring new mutations, so they had felt that it would be a huge waste to have him consume it immediately.

Their other mutations weren't suitable for their experiments.

Micky had already replicated Percy's Sage's Eye – which was one of the main reasons they felt so confident in the viability of the project. The problem with that one was that it was a sensory mutation, and that their Status did most of the heavy lifting. Micky had only needed to resolve a few redundancies and inefficiencies in his senses and figure out how to connect them to his mind and Status properly.

Percy's Greater Thess'kalan Physique, on the other hand, was one that they couldn't experiment with freely, because they only had a single set of ritual ingredients left.

The main advantages of the ruby powder were the relative simplicity of the mutation it granted and the abundance of the resource itself.

Watching someone's bones change for the umpteenth time, Micky tried to manually apply the same process to his own skeleton – though his transformation lagged behind the noble's by several seconds. Once they were both done, Micky took some time to stretch his limbs and assess the quality of his knockoff mutation as Percy finished activating the Blue's Moirais' Decree.

'Hmmm… it feels a little better than my previous attempt, but it's still not as good as the real thing,' he concluded, having experienced the complete mutation countless times.

Micky reverted his bones back to their normal state, before waiting for Percy to retrieve the clone and pass him his own share of memories. It might have been faster to consume the red powder directly, but they weren't sure that Micky would be able to revert the real thing.

A few minutes later, a rush of memories flooded his mind, allowing him to compare his efforts to the natural acquisition of the mutation. After identifying a couple of flaws and figuring out how to address them, he nodded at Percy to possess the second noble.

With every new Blue that received the mutation, Micky grew a little better, finding fewer and fewer imperfections in his version. This wasn't their first day working on this project, but they hoped that it would be the last.

They had been too busy with their artificial advancements to worry about this in the years leading to the battle in the Whistling Woods, yet the few weeks following Micky and Percy's reunion had provided them with plenty of opportunities to experiment on their allies.

After the sixth noble, Micky felt that his bones were about as strong as they were supposed to be, so he shifted his attention to his scales and fangs. Thankfully, the bonding process for various chitinous and keratinous body parts was more or less the same, meaning that he wouldn't have to spend another month observing his friend.

"Well? Why aren't we getting a notification? Do you need to watch me possess another group?" Percy asked after he was done with the final noble. The others had already left, returning to their other tasks.

"I'm not sure," Micky admitted. "I'd say that it's a perfect replica, but our Status clearly doesn't agree."

They shared the mutation section, and Percy already possessed Ruby Bones, so they didn't expect to register it a second time. This was why Micky had chosen a Thess'kalan body for this job. He had hoped that transforming both his scales and bones would either result in a separate entry, or an upgrade of the existing one into something like Kassorith's Ruby Panoply. The exact manner in which Phoebe's Decree dealt with the artificial mutation didn't really matter, but it would be nice to receive some confirmation that he had succeeded.

"Do you think that watching me grant the mutation to another dozen people will help?" Percy asked again.

"I doubt it," Micky replied with a shake of his head. "I can't even pinpoint what exactly is missing."

Percy sighed, pulling another pile of ruby powder out of his seal and dropping it in front of Micky. "The whole point was to figure this out without eating the material directly, but I suppose that there is no sense in holding it off if you're stuck. Just… make sure to note the differences."

Due to the abundance of the substance, it didn't really matter how Micky acquired this particular mutation. They only wanted to understand how to copy other mutations, that he and Percy wouldn't have the means to obtain repeatedly – such as the Greater Thess'kalan Physique. To accomplish that, Micky would have to reach a point where he could replicate a mutation after only witnessing or experiencing its acquisition once. Unfortunately, that was still a distant goal.

Scooping a handful of red powder, he swallowed it, paying close attention to the changes in his body. Usually, one had to consume an amount approximately equal to their weight before reaching saturation, but Micky didn't seem to need nearly that much.

His scales and bones were already almost perfect, so they only absorbed a pinch of powder, leaving the rest inside his stomach. A dozen spots across his body itched as tiny flaws corrected themselves with audible clicks, though the differences were so small that they didn't even alter the colour of his scales.

Micky frowned. 'The structure was correct, after all. I just happened to make a few mistakes here and there.'

The realization was both reassuring and disappointing. It meant that Micky was indeed capable of reverse engineering and replicating a mutation, yet doing it manually was clearly an inferior approach.

It was like the difference between pouring a bucket of paint on the floor, versus trying to colour every square centimetre with a fine brush. In the first case, the paint was guaranteed to spill over everything evenly, while in the latter, the painter might struggle to cover the floor uniformly.

Leaving behind even a single flaw in his skeleton would have made his bones prone to breaking, and Micky had no idea what issues might arise if he made a similar mistake while giving himself a different mutation.

'Food for thought, I suppose. We'll have to solve this issue before trying anything more ambitious.'

For the time being, he and Percy would have to be content with their new toy.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new mutation: Grey Panoply!]

Chapter 733 – Sharing the responsibility

Percy pulled up his Status to check the new entry at the bottom of the mutation section.

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Mutations:

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The wording of Grey Panoply was interesting. Micky's version of the mutation appeared to be even more general than Kassorith's – probably due to the fact that the Huehuan could apply it to all sorts of alien physiologies and body parts. Percy's gaze couldn't help but linger on the word "selectively", however.

"Do you think you can reverse it, after all?" he asked his fellow aspect.

Micky tried it. His grey scales didn't change colour, but Percy could still hear faint snapping and shifting sounds coming from them, as well as his friend's bones and fangs. A few seconds later, the noise stopped, before restarting again – seemingly in reverse.

"I can remove or reapply the transformation at will," the Huehuan confirmed once he was done. "It looks like we were too cautious."

Percy nodded. They'd considered the possibility, but they hadn't wanted to risk Micky losing the opportunity to practice repeatedly with a body that had lacked the mutation.

"What do you think about my Greater Thess'kalan Physique?" he asked.

Micky shifted back to his Huehuan appearance before responding. He even went so far as to alter the colour of his body to that of regular skin this time, clearly feeling more comfortable looking like an actual person than an animated statue of magical ice.

“Muscles and organs are far more complex and diverse than bones and scales, and I don’t have nearly as many examples to study,” Micky said with a sigh. “I suppose that there is no harm in trying, but don’t expect me to copy it in the next few months.”

“That’s fine. Split your time between that and Shapeshifting Sentries as you please. Nephthys and I have our own tasks to work on, as do the rest of our clones and allies,” Percy said.

At least, Micky wasn’t going into this project completely blind. He had access to the memories of both Percy and the clone who had possessed Kassorith before, during, and after undergoing the ritual. He could also study Percy’s experience of living with the mutation for over a decade and cross-reference it with hundreds of humans who didn’t have it.

The Huehuan didn’t even need to perfect the mutation – even making his body slightly stronger would be better than nothing. When Percy figured out how to tap into his ancestral lineage and use the final set of ingredients, Micky would have another chance to study the process.

While Percy wanted to improve his own mutation primarily so that he would be able to handle his familiar’s acid mana a little better, there were two main reasons why he wanted his friend to do the same.

Micky was a beast. His fighting style largely revolved around his physical strength. Mutations were even more important for him than other people. On top of that, Percy needed his friend’s help to produce an even stronger form of ice mana.

Through his Crystallization, Reinforcement, and Phantomspun Silk spells, Percy had figured out a way to turn his phantom mana into an extremely durable and flexible material to craft his equipment out of.

Unfortunately, Micky still didn’t have any good weapons and armour of his own – just the shoddy tools he borrowed from Percy. Due to his inability to generate enough phantom mana to properly maintain, repair or replicate them, and his soul-freezing ice mana twisting their form and harming their structural integrity, the Huehuan had to fight most of his battles practically naked.

Regular ice mana just wasn’t strong enough to rely on, but the augmented variants that he might produce inside his body after copying Percy’s mutations might be a different story.

‘Maybe I can further improve my silk, or combine it with Micky’s mana to develop even better materials,’ Percy thought.

It had been years since he had woven his own Cloak, and his magiscript skills had climbed to a whole new level. The problem was that researching new configurations for his materials was an arduous and time-consuming process, and Micky hadn’t even perfected his own version yet, so it made no sense to begin experimenting with flawed ingredients.

This would have to wait until Micky was done.

Bidding his fellow aspect farewell, Percy left his residence, making his way toward his family’s camp just outside the settlement. He walked casually, to give his clone a chance to return from Gallimus.

When the new bundle of memories reached him, he understood everything that had happened in outer space and the Sapphire Pavilion’s venue a lot better. The knowledge that Aje had shared about the Concept realm was fascinating, while the prizes that the clone had won from the auction were even more so.

As excited as Percy was about the karmic compasses, he decided not to act on them immediately. He still wanted to visit Melodia before heading anywhere else, and he didn’t have enough clones to send out on multiple trips.

In fact, he technically didn’t even have one, since he had left clones in Nephthys, Elaine, and Archibald – to work on their artificial advancements. Percy had wanted to leave one in Galahad’s body as well, on top of reserving at least a single cord to grant the Moirais’ Decree to the allied nobles.

Unfortunately, Percy couldn’t afford to delay giving everyone their new cores, since they needed to start cleansing and practicing with them as soon as possible. He also didn’t want to stop his interstellar adventures entirely, so his uncle was the one who had drawn the short end of the stick.

‘So many things to do, and so few clones to do them,’ he thought with a sigh. His promotions to Blue and the new cords they would grant him couldn’t come fast enough.

The good news was that some of his recent purchases didn’t require any of his cords.

Reaching his grandfather's tent, Percy found Nesha and Galahad inside, discussing alliance logistics with Archibald.

Apologizing for interrupting the meeting, Percy summoned hundreds of intricate boxes from his spatial seal, stacking them on a tall but neat pile in a corner of the small tent. His girlfriend and relatives watched him with great interest, though they didn't ask any questions, since he had already informed them about his latest haul.

"I've sorted them in descending order of their remaining duration," Percy explained once he was done. "Start handing out the ones on the left, since they're due to expire sooner. The colours of the treasures are pretty self-explanatory, so there shouldn't be any confusion as to the affinities they grant."

"I don't know if I'll be able to use every single charge optimally with this little time, but I'll do my best," Galahad warned.

"Of course," Percy replied, having no unreasonable expectations of his uncle.

House Avalon, the Guild's strongest combatants, and the nobles scheduled to reach the Fungal Spire in the next few weeks would obviously be given priority. The last group would also be provided with small batches of treasures to bring back to their families, to help spread out Percy's gifts. House Etna alone had a couple thousand mages, while the other five Houses easily totalled over fifteen hundred. The Alchemists' Guild had a lot more people than that, but only a fraction of them were both powerful and experienced combatants.

After all was said and done, Percy expected to have around five thousand candidates to receive the treasures. Since most of them would hopefully acquire a second core as well in the near future, and roughly twenty percent of the cores would possess the pure affinity – thus requiring a pair of new elements each – Percy estimated that they would need around twelve thousand charges.

However, not everyone would receive the Moirais' Decree or reach the Fungal Spire in a timely manner, and there might be elements that they needed more or fewer charges of, so he felt that paying ten thousand tokens for the treasures had been a good compromise to minimize wastage. Any mages who got left out or who joined the alliance later would have to wait for a future batch.

Once Nesha and Galahad reassured him that they would handle the rest, Percy turned his attention to his grandfather, taking one final affinity-changing treasure out of his spatial seal: a worn notebook that contained a pair of glossy silver sheets.

“Is that what I think it is?” the Violet asked, seeing through his grandson’s intentions at a glance.

Percy grinned, tearing out the first of the two pages and crumpling it up into a small ball before handing it over. “Eat up, gramps. I can hardly wait to have another person to share all this responsibility with…”

Chapter 734 – The Lone Wanderer (1)

Had Percy been given the option, he would have preferred to buy a soul affinity-changing treasure with a single charge, as it would have obviously saved him tens of thousands of tokens.

Archibald was far from the only powerful mage in the alliance who possessed a pure affinity, but Percy wouldn’t have spent such a ridiculous amount of money just to strengthen one of his relatives if not for the element’s unique synergy with the Clone bloodline. Sadly, the notebook had come with two pages, and Percy had to pick a second lucky mage, so he ended up going with his aunt, Isolde.

Isolde was Galahad’s younger sister from the same mother, as well as the only Blue in the family who not only possessed the bloodline, but had also awakened a pure core in her abdomen. Percy wasn’t too familiar with the woman, so he’d been more than happy to follow Archibald’s suggestion.

After passing the expensive resource to his aunt and grandfather, he returned to the settlement to give them the time to clear the first set of channels for their altered core and to get accustomed to their new abilities. Technically, he could always ask the clone in Archibald’s body what his grandfather was doing, but he didn’t want to disturb them during their experimentation.

Back at his house, he couldn’t help but anxiously pace back and forth, struggling to bring himself to focus on other projects. In different circumstances, he would have been thrilled to finally pull the magical plaque out of his spatial seal to give himself a mindset, yet even that was something that Percy wasn’t in the mood for.

He wasn’t sure why he felt so strongly about this particular endeavour.

Perhaps, it had something to do with the fact that his very identity was on the line. A tiny, foolish… selfish part of him was a little sad that he was about to lose his uniqueness as the only person in the universe who could create soul clones and possess others. A much larger and more rational part, however, was quite thrilled that Remior would acquire two new 'wanderers'.

Given Percy's track record of placing himself in constant danger, it was probably better for his world to have a couple of backup options. He didn't regret frequently undertaking major risks, because he understood that one couldn't hope to attain divinity without enduring hardships and braving danger.

Still, the combination of his bloodline and affinity was a priceless asset – one that any faction in the universe would give anything to obtain, yet which only Remior had been lucky enough to produce. Should Percy get himself killed one day, it would be a colossal blow to his world.

Or it would have been – before today.

Leaving aside the preservation of his abilities, he was also quite excited about what his aunt and grandfather would soon be capable of. They didn't have the Blessing of Permanence – not yet, anyway – but their high-graded cores would still afford them with a significant number of cords right from the start.

Isolde had a Blue and a Yellow core, which should allow her to send out four clones. Archibald had a Violet and a Green core, giving him five slots in total. Their second cores would advance again in a few years, and Zoris might be willing to further double their capacity, as he had already done for Percy.

Even with a handful of cords each, they would immediately be able to pass the Moirais' Decree to the rest of the alliance – and, one day, to the rest of the planet – saving Percy the trouble. They should also be able to roam the universe alongside Percy, helping him bring back countless treasures – many of which might benefit him as much as his own findings had helped his family.

Needless to say, Percy didn't sleep at all that night. Well… okay. That didn't mean much, considering his Insomnia trait, but he was pretty sure that his excitement would have kept him awake regardless.

Rushing back to his family's camp first thing in the morning, he asked the clone in his grandfather's body to alert the man to his presence. Upon being allowed inside the tent, he flashed the tired Violet an expectant look.

“I’m afraid that you may have wasted your money on us,” Archibald muttered with a shake of his head.

A pit formed in Percy’s chest. “What do you mean? You have the bloodline and the affinity – what else could you possibly be missing?”

His grandfather sighed, gesturing for him to sit. There wasn’t any furniture in the tent yet, so Percy had to sit cross-legged across from the patriarch who was doing the same. Archibald had dark bags under his eyes, and his second core was half-empty, indicating that he had spent all night working.

“Your clone has already drawn a few seals inside my life core, so he can’t return to share his memories without the constructs falling apart. Even helping me with my experiments without messing up his work was a struggle. But it’s better to show you anyway,” the Violet explained.

He loosely cupped his hands while leaving just enough space between his palms to fit an object the size of an apple. Percy carefully scanned his grandfather from head to toe with his Sage’s Pond, not missing the moment when the man activated his bloodline. The ghostly claw that always sprung out of Percy’s core to carve out a chunk of his soul didn’t appear.

Instead, a series of gentle pulses of soul mana rippled out of the patriarch’s abdomen, rhythmically bouncing off of the bumpy surface of his soul and slowly converging towards his palms.

Despite having had this affinity for less than twenty-four hours, Archibald’s efforts were far more refined than Percy’s had been as a teenager – probably due to the Violet’s centuries of experience with a different version of the bloodline, and the clone’s guidance. Of course, he was still far worse than Percy currently was, since his soul wasn’t rigid and unmoving like his flesh, nor was he very familiar with the new mana type.

Either way, Percy didn’t care about his grandfather’s clumsiness – only the purpose of his actions.

The patriarch had taught Percy this method of channelling and gathering his mana through his soul as a way to supercharge his clones, packing them full of soul mana to help them in their adventures. However, Percy’s version of the bloodline differed from the normal one, in that his clones weren’t actually created out of mana, but severed directly from his soul.

That… was not what Archibald was doing.

Bright silver flashes spilled out of the Violet's palms, coalescing into a pulsating orb that seemed to grow slightly larger with every oscillation. It started off smaller than Archibald's fingernails, but it reached the size of a cherry in a few seconds.

Through his in-built Soul Vision, Percy could see that the embryonic clone wasn't actually connected to Archibald's soul – it was an entirely new entity that had been created just moments earlier, in a manner that closely resembled the gestation of a life clone.

Percy couldn't help but crease his forehead. "Have you tried anything else? Maybe there's a second way to activate my bloodline that I never discovered."

Archibald shook his head. "I've seen your version many times, so I went into this project knowing what to look for. I activated the bloodline over fifty times last night, but nothing even remotely similar to that ghostly claw of yours ever appeared. I even managed to manually snip a piece of my soul off with a rough soul blade, but it collapsed immediately after leaving my body. Your clone also tried to activate my bloodline once, but he wasn't able to do any better than me. This was the only way to get it to work."

Percy noted that the clone between his grandfather's hands was growing relatively slowly. A Violet could create a life clone in a single day, and the soul clone looked like it would be ready several times faster than that, despite the patriarch's second core being merely at Green. That said, the speed still couldn't be compared to Percy, who could have a soul clone ready in seconds. That had to be the difference between cutting off an existing piece of his soul versus generating a clone from scratch.

"Okay. That's not necessarily the end of the world," Percy said. "Your version of the bloodline appears to work a little differently and more slowly than mine, but you can still produce soul clones, can't you? Have you tried sending one out?"

"I have," Archibald said, though he didn't elaborate.

Preparing the soul clone took about an hour, which wasn't that long in the grand scheme of things. It was faster than a life clone because Archibald didn't have to grow the wisp to the size of a human, nor give it a skeleton or a defined structure.

Once the patriarch deemed his creation to be ready, he released it, allowing it to fly away. The clone moved at a dizzying speed, escaping the range of Percy's senses in an instant. At least, from what little Percy had seen, the clone had appeared stable – more so than the piece of Archibald's soul that the Violet had claimed to have tried and failed to sever. A few seconds later, the disembodied wisp entered Percy's bubble of information again, though it was still moving way too fast, so it escaped through the opposite boundary almost immediately.

"It's not autonomous like yours," Archibald explained. "I have to control it manually, like my life clones, though I'm still trying to get the hang of it. If it flies too far, the connection breaks and I can't provide it with enough soul mana to survive."

Chapter 735 – The Lone Wanderer (2)

"What can it do?" Percy asked.

"Not much," the patriarch admitted. "I can share its senses – or sense, I should say, since there's just the one. It's surrounded by complete darkness, though I can just about feel the souls in its surroundings if I concentrate. If I'm not mistaken, that's the same version of Soul Vision that your own clones possess in their disembodied state."

Percy nodded. This wasn't ideal. So far, it didn't sound like Archibald would be able to use his soul clones for more than scouting, but the difficulty in handling them and their limited senses would render them somewhat useless. They were objectively worse than Micky's sentries, since those were far easier to control and possessed a copy of his Sage's Pond.

"Have you tried placing them inside a body?" he asked.

"It doesn't work," Archibald said.

Reaching behind his back and to his right, the patriarch picked up a furry carcass that Percy hadn't noticed earlier. No. Not a carcass. The squirrel was still breathing slowly, its soul faint and dimming, but

still there. Archibald must have kept the unfortunate critter alive through the careful and frequent application of life and soul mana.

Gently placing the creature on his lap, the patriarch spent a few minutes trying to send his clone into its body. The silver wisp shot through Percy's sensory sphere dozens of times, only managing to pass through House Avalon's camp twice. It wasn't until the fiftieth or so attempt that Archibald finally managed to aim the whizzing clone directly at the squirrel.

The collision happened too fast to observe carefully, but the outcome was obvious enough. The squirrel's body had rejected the clone, causing it to bounce right out and to exit Percy's sensory bubble once more.

"That shouldn't have happened," Percy said.

The rodent was definitely injured enough to attract a soul clone rather than reject it. If anything, its wounds were so bad that the creature was probably beyond fixing, but that was all the more reason for it to have allowed the disembodied wisp to join it.

"So… is it completely useless?" Percy asked again. "An hour to create one, just to end up with the world's worst scout?"

Hell, Archibald couldn't even send them to other planets, since he wouldn't be able to maintain a manual connection over such a vast distance. Even if he did, it wouldn't mean much without the ability to possess people.

"Not exactly," the patriarch said. "I've found a use. It's not the most exciting thing, but it'll make me stronger."

A man entered the tent, looking identical to Archibald, except for his listless eyes: a life clone. The Violet spent a few minutes trying to bring back the soul clone as well. Luckily, he managed to do it a little sooner this time.

The disembodied wisp shot right into the mindless thrall, lodging itself within its flesh. Unlike before, the soul clone didn't get rejected. Instead, it fused into the even tinier silver wisp that had always existed

within the minion, causing it to expand and burn more fiercely – almost as if the two beings had always been meant for one another.

The life clone's soul didn't reach the size or brightness of a normal person's, but it came pretty close. Its grey eyes remained mostly blank and unfocused, though the faintest spark of awareness lit up in the depths of the minion's pupils.

The thick flow of Violet life mana drifting aimlessly across the clone's body converged at its sternum, as the thinner trickle of Green soul mana coursing through its soul did something similar at its abdomen. A pair of strange cavities that vaguely resembled peanuts appeared in those two spots. They were too small and irregular to be called mana cores, though Percy didn't have a better word to describe them – and their affinities matched those of their owner.

"My theory is that they can possess my life clones because they're copies of my flesh. But they can't cast spells with those tiny mana cores of theirs," the patriarch said before his grandson even asked.

"What are they good for?"

"They passively breathe and convert small amounts of ambient mana from their surroundings, making it less costly for me to maintain them. The same is true of the mental toll they exert. They still can't be considered fully autonomous, but the addition of the soul clones has done something to them. It seems like I can get away with providing them with mere intentions rather than having to control every muscle in their body," Archibald explained.

"How much better are we talking about?"

His grandfather rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a couple of seconds. "It's hard to tell with so few tests. I also can't use the boosting art with the new affinity yet, and my second core is two grades lower. Once it catches up, I wouldn't be surprised if I can sustain three times as many clones."

Percy drew a sharp breath. The theoretical maximum for a Violet with the Dance would be seven hundred and twenty-nine life clones – though Archibald hadn't dared to produce more than three hundred. He still wasn't able to keep his boosting art constantly active, and he preferred to retain some free mana to cast other spells with.

With the addition of the soul affinity, he would be able to approach a thousand clones, and this was before even factoring in his artificial advancement!

“It’s a major upgrade,” Percy said with a sigh. “Just… not what we were hoping for.”

House Avalon’s bloodline had always been considered a strong one – even before Percy’s emergence – and the synergy between Archibald’s affinities would push it to even greater heights. However, it still didn’t hold a candle to Percy’s version of Clone. Then again, few things in the universe did.

Archibald patted his grandson on the shoulder consolingly. “It looks like you inherited a mutated version, after all. The wording in your Status is the same, but the fact that it didn’t get automatically bundled with the life affinity should have clued us in.”

“What about Aunt Isolde?” Percy asked, not expecting much. The woman had inherited the bloodline from Archibald, so she would either have the same strain as the patriarch or a different one entirely.

“She’s been much slower at clearing her channels and experimenting with it, since she lacks my experience and your clone’s help. Judging from what little she has accomplished so far, she’s in the same boat as me.”

“Phoebe won’t be happy,” Percy realized. “She won’t be able to mould another member of our family into a second me. Do you think she might reconsider allowing Machaon to kill me?”

“I’m not sure,” Archibald admitted. “She’ll still probably want to send challenges your way to accelerate your growth. If anything, she might even give him permission to slaughter the rest of us with impunity, since we’re not as useful as we thought.”

Percy’s features twisted into a grimace, which only deepened as his grandfather kept speaking.

“I’ve been putting this conversation off for years now, since I don’t want to involve myself in your personal matters, yet I suppose that this is as good a time as any to ask: have you considered having children?”

Percy sighed. It was an awkward topic, but one that he couldn't keep avoiding. Now that they knew that he was quite possibly the only person on the planet with the "correct" strain of the Clone bloodline, his own descendants would be the only ones who stood a good chance of inheriting it. No matter how he thought about it, having kids was simply the responsible thing to do. Many would argue that it was Percy's duty, even.

"I have considered it," he muttered. "I've never discussed getting married or starting a family with Nesha though."

"And? What did you decide?"

"I'm not opposed to the idea of having children one day. I just don't want to be an absentee father, and I'm too busy working on a million different things to see myself raising kids properly in the foreseeable future," Percy explained.

"It's your choice." Archibald shrugged. "I'm not going to press you, but I'm sure you don't need me to explain what will happen if you die."

Percy nodded solemnly. Many of the things that he had set in motion on Remior would continue – the planet would still steadily develop into a greater spring, the nobles would retain the knowledge of the Vault's magiscript and the boosting art, and even the hive would probably survive without Nephthys, since the gods had kept the original Starry Princess alive and well.

However, humanity would instantly lose access to some of its greatest assets. At the very least, there would be nobody left to keep spreading the Moirais' Decree, which would be quite a shame.

The Void Hand had gone so far as to sacrifice multiple titans just to produce a lesser version of the Decree, yet Percy could just pass it along to whomever he pleased. This was the sort of thing that even greater springs wouldn't dare to dream of – let alone a world that had practically been an undeveloped lesser spring until yesterday.

Letting this priceless gift slip through their fingers before figuring out how to perpetuate its inheritance would be a crime.

Percy left his grandfather's tent and his family's camp feeling a little bummed out. Evidently, Phoebe's Decree hadn't named Percy and Micky "the Lone Wanderer" by accident. It had clearly understood things about them that they didn't – things that not even the titaness who had created it was privy to.

'I better not die then,' he decided upon reaching his residence. 'Not that I was planning to.'

At the end of the day, nothing had really changed. Percy had simply been told that there would be nobody left to pick up his mantle should he perish. That was arguably the assumption that he'd been operating under already, though the tiny hope that Phoebe would have found a way to make up for his untimely demise by investing in House Avalon was now gone as well.

Sighing, Percy finally summoned the plaque in his hands, activating its enchantments with grim determination. There was no time left to waste. He had to grow stronger than his enemies – be they a bunch of corrupt nobles plotting against him, a sadistic god ruling over his friend's people with an iron fist, a furious greater spring seeking to punish him for spreading information that was best kept secret, or a cosmic cancer growing stronger and more malicious by the day.

The runes on the object lit up with a deep crimson colour, causing a foreign influence to rush into Percy's mind.

Chapter 736 – Enhanced Cognition

Percy had obviously known that the plaque he had purchased wasn't the most efficient artifact in the universe. Not only had the Attendant admitted its shortcomings before the auction, but Tiberius and his interstellar companions had also attested to that fact after receiving the modest benefits of the object during the return trip.

Still, it was one thing to be told by others, and another thing to personally experience the process firsthand.

Whoever had created the plaque had clearly carved the runes using mind mana, but the artifact had to function without it. As far as Percy knew, only mana cores, internal worlds, and Elemental Sources could directly convert mana from one affinity to another, so the enchantments on the object wouldn't be able to replenish mana of a certain element if it got consumed.

Sadly, ambient mana lacked many of the properties that would allow it to flow through the recipient's body and interact with their mind correctly, forcing the mage who had designed the object to make certain concessions.

The runes responsible for producing the mindset had already activated, bathing Percy in a gentle radiance and attempting to plant the seed of his new ability from afar. This was an inferior method to the one Saint Ludwick had employed, since the deceased demigod had been fine with not being able to grant his Compass to more people after depleting his ancient stash of Clear mana.

The subpar runework on the object didn't help much either. It was admittedly a little better than House Etna's original language, but far worse than the enchantments that Percy had seen on the Void Hand's planets or the Sapphire Pavilion's hall – let alone the Vault's magiscript.

'This is good news for us,' Percy thought. 'If we create a similar plaque that just replaces the enchantments and is capable of running on any mind user's mana, the resulting mindset should grow at least thirty percent more effective.'

Translating this random planet's language and rearranging the runes into a more efficient configuration might take years, and the product would still be worse than a custom-made mindset, so Percy wasn't in a hurry to embark on that project.

Once the plaque's enchantments dimmed, Percy reached into the new seed inside his mind, willing it to activate. A wave of warmth exploded outwards, spreading to every corner of his brain. It felt like the mindset's figurative roots were pushing and stirring the contents of his skull, rearranging everything within. Memories rose and sank in unfamiliar patterns, old associations shifting places as if invisible hands were reorganizing a vast library. At least it wasn't painful, though it was quite uncomfortable.

By the time the notification appeared and the mental intrusion died down, Percy was on his knees, struggling to keep the most recent Honey Roll inside his stomach.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new mindset: Enhanced Cognition!]

'A warning would have been nice!' Micky protested through the connection, his words accompanied by a spectral groan.

‘Serves you right,’ Percy replied with a chuckle. ‘You may consider us even now.’

The Huehuan grumbled something, but Percy ignored his friend entirely, deciding to let him experiment with the mindset on his own. It didn’t look like there was much to study, but they might arrive at different conclusions if they played with their latest acquisition separately.

After drinking some water and taking a quick shower to wash away his nausea, Percy examined his mental state.

His thoughts felt a little clearer and flowed more smoothly, reminding him of the way he usually felt after a core promotion. The only difference was that the modest wave of euphoria wasn’t fading this time.

‘Huh. I can get used to this.’

The colours and textures in Percy’s surroundings had grown more vibrant. He was easily able to tell how deep and rough the cracks and crevices in the stone walls of his bedroom were, as well as spot even the tiniest splinters protruding from his wooden furniture. Dust drifting through the air stood out more clearly too, each particle catching the light for a fleeting instant before vanishing from notice.

The magical motes danced around him slightly more slowly, though the change was barely perceptible, and Percy knew that it was just an illusion – it wasn’t the flow of time that had changed, but the speed at which he was experiencing it.

Allowing his Sage’s Pond to unfold, Percy noticed that his sensory domain stretched a little farther than usual. He estimated that he could now see things up to five and a half kilometres away while supplementing the spell with his willpower. He doubted that the mindset had directly sharpened his senses, but accelerating his cognition had allowed him to interpolate and extrapolate more information based on the same amount of data.

‘I can control a couple of additional sentries and handle a single extra Pond,’ Micky informed him. ‘I bet you should be able to do the same, though we still won’t be able to focus on all of them at the same time.’

Percy nodded. ‘It should help with alchemy and runecrafting too.’

Satisfied with his cursory examination, he pulled up the new description in his Status, wondering whether there was anything that he had missed.

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Mindsets [57%]:

___

It wasn’t the most groundbreaking upgrade, but it was a welcome one.

Percy’s new mindset ate up more than half of his mental capacity. He’d been told that this would be the case, but he didn’t feel any kind of strain on his brain. If anything, it was the exact opposite, though he guessed that the mindsets would stop functioning properly if he tried to exceed the limit.

Hopefully, the first two wouldn’t be affected too badly since they were both extremely cheap, but Percy would rather not put that to the test. It wouldn’t be the end of the world if his memories fused with Micky’s and had to be separated again, but the last thing he needed was to lose all the planets that he had marked with Ludwick’s Compass.

Fifty-seven percent of his capacity did sound a little high considering the relatively weak effect of the mindset. The improvement was noticeable, even pleasant, but hardly transformative. Percy was sure that it was possible to improve the plaque so that it would grant a mindset which achieved the same effect with under forty percent of a person’s capacity.

The problem was that Percy would need a mind user skilled in runecrafting to carve the new enchantments. Also, he wasn’t sure that the repertoire of runes that he had purchased from the Vault – expansive as it was – contained enough details on this particular subject. Upgrading the artifact might have to wait until his next visit to the artificial world, which should be centuries away.

Scaling the mindset to use a hundred percent of his brain would theoretically amplify the effect by two and a half times, allowing him and Micky to control another handful of sentries each. It still wouldn't be enough to fully manage the entire army of constructs, though Percy didn't know what else might be possible with a specialized mindset.

'Maybe we can give up on other functions to further boost its compatibility with the spell. Then again, that's not necessarily the best use for our mental capacity either.'

Even though the new mindset was somewhat rough around the edges, Percy didn't regret his purchase. Leaving aside the fact that he would now be making use of a previously untapped resource, exploring the effects of Enhanced Cognition for a few months or years should prove quite informative. When he found somebody capable of granting him a proper mindset, Percy would have a much better idea of what to expect, and what to ask for.

Happy with his analysis, he stored the plaque inside his seal, reminding himself to pass it to Nesha or Galahad later.

Annoyingly, the earliest recipients of Percy's gifts would have to travel to the Fungal Spire a second time, since he kept finding new resources to empower his allies with. Thankfully, nobody had complained yet.

And why would they? This was a nice problem to have.

With his most pressing tasks taken care of, Percy finally had some free time to check up on a bunch of interesting ingredients that he had neglected over the past couple of weeks. Hopping into the tunnel leading to the depths of the hive, he eagerly walked through the crystal-lit corridor leading to one of his most frequently used chambers.

Unlike the empty, circular caves he usually trained in, he had asked the wasps to construct this space with several rows of inner walls, separated by passages barely wide enough for a human to walk through. He needed them, because the magical reagent he was cultivating seemed to grow best on vertical surfaces.

Spreading his Sage's Pond across the room, his vision was momentarily overwhelmed by the pale golden glow of the plant. The details inside the cavern appeared to settle a little faster than usual, causing Percy to crack a smile.

The moss clung to the minerals in thick, uneven patches, its light pooling across the walls and reflecting off of even the mundane metals and crystals.

'Let's see if this weird ingredient is of any use…'

Chapter 737 – Strange moss

Percy's plans for the pale moss stretched far beyond brewing a new type of potion. If the ingredient was anything like the green and red mushrooms he had found in the Grisly Bog, there was a chance that it could be used for alchemy, but that was a secondary goal. Cultivating the unusual resource was in many ways an excuse to study certain other things that Percy had previously lacked the time for.

Before harvesting the plant, he examined the various patches that unfolded across the stone walls of the cavern, comparing them to one another. To an untrained eye, the herbal layer coating every vertical surface in the room might have appeared uniform, but Percy easily identified three distinct sections – and not just because he'd been the one who had planted them.

The moss growing on the columns closest to him was slightly thinner and less vibrant, with the occasional bald spot revealing the minerals hiding beneath. This was the section that had been provided mostly with plain water, only mixed with the occasional bit of pulverized wasp flesh so that the plant would have enough nutrients to develop. The rich ambient mana inside the hive had helped this side of Percy's underground garden to flourish despite the relative lack of sustenance, though the underfed moss might have not survived anywhere else on Remior.

The other half of the cavern shone more brightly, the magical wallpaper appearing thicker, healthier, and with almost no gaps – save for the rare crystal or sharp stony tip jutting out of the floral film. This moss had been provided with ample amounts of crushed bugs, harvested from stronger creatures and slathered onto the pillars before the mana inside the meat had the chance to dissipate.

'It seems like we were right. The moss is carnivorous like the trolls' mushrooms,' Percy confirmed.

He still had no idea why seemingly unconnected ingredients of entirely different affinities had developed similar symbiotic relationships with distinct tribes of demi-humans. However, the fact that he could accelerate the moss's growth by sacrificing a negligible number of wasps was convenient.

Having solved the first mystery, he reached out to his familiar and the clone inhabiting her body, informing them about his findings and asking them to have the Starry Workers feed every patch of moss with dead insects from now on.

With that out of the way, Percy focused on the final section at the very back of the room. It contained less than five percent of the moss, but it was growing more rapidly than even the patches fed exclusively with wasp meat. This was the section that he had personally watered with spiritual blood whenever he'd had some free time.

The Orange mana coursing through the plant was even denser than the previous region, though it showed no sign of advancing to the next grade just yet. The faint layer of silver permeating the moss within Percy's Soul Vision was slightly more pronounced than anywhere else in the cavern, but it couldn't be compared to even the most simpleminded animals.

'There's no way I'll be able to put a clone in this thing anytime soon.'

Percy sighed, though he wasn't too disappointed. Everything he had read about the Decree had warned that cultivating ingredients with spiritual blood required years to yield results, so he hadn't expected the moss to reach Yellow or develop even a semblance of spirituality after only a couple of weeks. If anything, he was glad that the moss had shown a modicum of change, as it suggested that he wasn't wasting his time.

Gathering phantom mana at the tips of his index and middle finger, he forged it into a point. With a swift motion, he carved a deep and long wound along his left forearm, clenching the corresponding fist to bleed out faster. Moulding his willpower into an invisible funnel, he directed the flow of blood onto the moss, sprinkling it evenly across the special section of the garden until he started feeling slightly lightheaded.

'I guess that's enough for today.'

Injecting a dose of Blue healing ink directly into his veins, he aided the remaining spiritual blood in mending the injury faster. Once there was no trace of the incision on his skin, he rummaged through his seal in search of anything edible. Luckily, he found some leftover chicken breast from three days earlier that Nesha had generously roasted for them both, still dripping with lemon juice and pieces of rosemary.

Much like Percy, his girlfriend had never been much of a cook, but she had recently made the effort to learn a few simple recipes for his sake, claiming that she couldn't bear to watch him live "like this" any longer.

He wasn't sure what the problem was. With two Green cores and an enhanced physique, his body was a lot more resilient than it used to be. Surviving on Honey Rolls and the occasional fruit or piece of bread without getting sick shouldn't be much of an issue. That said, Percy did appreciate that Nesha was concerned about him, and he had greatly enjoyed her food, so he wasn't going to complain.

As he waited for the heating enchantments he hastily engraved onto a slab of phantom mana to warm up his meal, he sat down on the bumpy floor of the cavern, using the Penitent's Decree to dissolve small chunks of his soul into his bloodstream. Replenishing the consumed resource would take several hours, which was arguably the most annoying part of his experiments, but he was determined to soldier through the discomfort until he saw results.

It was only after his stomach was full and his spiritual blood partially recovered that he stood up again. Ignoring the fastest-growing section of moss, he used his willpower to scrape a large quantity of the ingredient from the pillars fed exclusively with wasp pulp. Rolling the pale carpet into a cylinder taller and thicker than a person, he stored it into his seal before exiting through a tunnel that led to a more spacious room.

Other than brewing Gloomy Dawn and Blue potions for himself and his closest allies, Percy hadn't invested as much time into alchemy as he would have liked during the past couple of years. Upgrading his Sovereign's Encroachment to the Sage's Pond, promoting his cores, and crafting a new cauldron had still boosted his brewing yield by two points, bringing it up to sixty-six percent.

The jump had been even smaller than the previous time, making it clear that reaching seventy percent as a mortal would be a massive challenge, but Percy was more than satisfied with his gains.

Qualitatively speaking, his Sage's Pond wasn't that much better than the previous iteration of Percy's Wild Art, but it did mark a huge quantitative improvement. By focusing his entire sensory domain inwards, he had been able to brew much greater volumes of ingredients without negatively affecting his

efficiency. In practice, that had allowed him to double the size of his newest cauldron once more, allowing it to fit a hundred times the ingredients of a standard cauldron.

The fact that Micky and any soul clones possessing sapient hosts could brew similar quantities of ingredients independently from him only made the situation even better. If he and his fellow aspect decided to drop their other projects and focus exclusively on alchemy, they would be able to brew as much Aurora Dew as thousands of alchemists.

'Maybe one day,' he thought with a shrug, knowing that this wasn't an option as things stood.

Either way, figuring out the properties of the yellow moss should be trivial.

Less than a day later, Percy was holding a vial full of a pale liquid, glowing with a deep Orange colour within his Mana Sense. Sadly, consuming the potion in this state wouldn't tell him much, because his grade was already too high to be affected by something this weak.

Compressing it all the way to Blue took a couple more days, since each step required him to work out the correct frequency and amplitude of pressure to apply on the concoction. The fact that he had to undergo a similar but slightly different process three times – to elevate the liquid to Yellow, Green, and finally Blue – didn't help.

The good news was that the consolidation principle would eventually allow him to combine the three steps into one, eliminating redundancies and saving him a lot of time and wasted ingredients in future brewing sessions, but there was no avoiding the initial period of research.

When the concoction was ready, Percy gulped it down. The dense light mana spread out of his stomach, permeating every corner of his body. Most body parts remained unaffected, though Percy noticed that his eyes seemed to react to the foreign substance in a unique way, making his vision slightly clearer.

The exact effect wasn't obvious at first, though he'd gone into the project already having a hunch of what the potion would do.

Having anticipated that his well-illuminated cavern wouldn't be the best place to test the effect of his brew, Percy entered a narrow tunnel leading to a smaller room only a couple dozen metres away.

The new chamber was special in that it had been coated with regular dirt and mundane rocks, to minimize the ambient glow that permeated the rest of the hive. Using his domain, Percy pushed the colourful motes out of the room as well, plunging it into complete darkness.

Or… well. That was what should have happened.

Despite his efforts to eliminate every possible source of light, Percy wasn't too surprised to find himself capable of examining the rocky walls in front of his eyes just as clearly as before.

'Night vision… exactly like the goblins.'

It was a little disappointing. Percy's wide assortment of magical senses already provided him with plenty of alternatives to navigate even complete darkness, so a mild form of night vision wouldn't really change much. At most, the additional trickle of information might push the range of his Sage's Pond a little higher still, but he didn't expect a large improvement – certainly not one worth the trouble of regularly brewing the Blue variant of the potion.

Percy didn't give up immediately, however, guessing that there was probably a more efficient way to use it.

Considering its similarities to the green and red mushrooms, he first spent a couple of days figuring out how to convert the potion into tattoo ink, thinking that it might be more effective when injected directly into his skin or bloodstream.

Contrary to his expectations, the effect of the ink appeared to be even weaker than that of the ingested potion, marking this as the first notable area where the properties of the moss had deviated somewhat from those of the fungi.

In a burst of inspiration, Percy eventually tried pouring the original version of the liquid directly into his eyes, finally seeing a significant improvement. Perhaps this should have been the first thing he tried but, in his defence, he didn't have any prior experience using his potions as eyedrops.

Over ninety percent of the light mana got absorbed by his eyes, sharpening his vision twice as much as before, though it clearly worked best in dark environments. It also stretched his Sage's Pond by another five hundred metres.

Combined with the modest effects of the mindset that he had acquired just days earlier, the potion stretched the radius of Percy's secondary domain to a little over six kilometres. It was a sizeable increase – albeit a temporary one.

'Eh… it might be worth having a few doses on the side. I'm going to call this one "goblinsight potion",' he decided.

It wasn't the most original name, nor was he too thrilled about his new brew. Even the trollsfury ink wasn't the most potent resource, despite having saved his life a bunch of times before.

That said, his success had left him even more curious about demi-humans. The two tribes that he had encountered had both produced strange ingredients that were suitable for alchemy, and Percy knew of at least one other species that Elaine had mentioned hunting in her youth.

Perhaps, it was time to pay them a visit. There was clearly some deeper secret linking the primitive creatures to the magical ingredients growing in their habitats, and Percy was going to uncover it.

Chapter 738 – Echoes

Machaon's features would have twisted into a grimace if they weren't locked in the shape of a single, even uglier expression. The regrown skin was fused with non-functioning facial muscles into a thin, scarred sheet of flesh that tightly hugged his skull.

His lips were missing, revealing rows of brand-new teeth that were permanently clenched into a frustrated grin. His hair and eyebrows had never grown back – nor were they going to, according to the healers – and even the cartilage of his nose had been replaced by a flat slab of skin that surrounded a pair of narrow slits.

The life mages that Machaon and his allies controlled had managed to regrow his missing limbs and recover their functionality, but they had lacked the delicate touch necessary to restore the patriarch's handsome appearance. Unfortunately, the most skilled healers on Remior – the ones that Machaon might have hired under other circumstances – currently stood against him.

Unable to stare at his malformed reflection any longer, he struck the mirror with a violent burst of willpower, shattering it into sand and whipping up a dusty storm within his claustrophobic chamber.

Machaon had only ever used his immaculate appearance as a tool to further his ends. Such concerns were no longer relevant – only raw power was – though he'd be lying if he said that he didn't find his monstrous visage unsettling.

'As long as it doesn't affect my strength, it doesn't matter,' he tried to convince himself amidst a coughing fit. 'My ascension to divinity will fix my body anyway.'

Being confined to this rotting castle was arguably a bigger issue than his incomplete healing. Cracked, mouldy walls stretched everywhere around him, with tangled sheets of ancient cobwebs hanging loosely from the ceiling wherever he looked. Every step he took left a deep bootprint in the thick layer of dust that coated every square centimetre of the dilapidated building.

The servants had been busy trying to clean the castle, but the structure was far too vast to be tidied up within a month. Machaon wanted nothing more than to venture outside for some fresh air – it was the least that he deserved after the numerous agonizing procedures that he'd had to endure during the reconstruction of his body.

But he couldn't. It wasn't safe.

It had been thousands of years since anyone had dared to tell Machaon where he could or couldn't go. Sadly, the Red-born had already proven himself capable of besting even a White-cored mage in single combat, so Machaon and his peers couldn't afford to give the boy a chance to pick them off one by one.

The only way to protect themselves from a potential assassination attempt was to remain close to one another. Of all the properties that the three Great Houses jointly owned, the castle located near the north-western shore of the continent was by far the largest one. It was capable of housing over fifteen thousand mages.

The Divine Root had relocated to newer, more conveniently placed structures millennia ago, causing the sprawling structure to fall into disrepair, but it was currently the only place that could accommodate the entire alliance.

‘All of this is temporary. We just have to master the external part of the boosting art and squash that irritating fly.’

Percy was undoubtedly working hard to elevate his strength at this very moment, but Machaon was confident that he and his colleagues would outgrow the young upstart this time.

Nobody understood how the boy had managed to advance all the way from Red to Green in less than half a century, and there was no denying how impressive it was that the young noble had bridged the enormous gap separating his actual grade from the fighting strength of a White.

Still, there had to be a limit to the Red-born’s growth. Percy would have to stack multiple incremental boosts to keep up with Machaon’s looming spell upgrade. Even if the boy found a way to make up for the jump from Circulation to the Dance, the three patriarchs would just have to combine their strength to execute him.

More worrying than Percy’s personal growth was that of his coalition.

Those who had received the Red-born’s many gifts had remained tight-lipped about the most sensitive details, but some information had still leaked, despite the strict spectral contracts that the boy had imposed on his allies. This wasn’t an accident, nor a miscalculation on House Avalon’s part.

Archibald and his grandson had deliberately allowed word about the new cores, mindsets, mutations, and affinity-changing treasures to spread, because they needed to entice more noble families into joining them.

And it had worked like a charm.

Based on what House Asclepius’ informants had managed to piece together, at least three additional families had recently reached out to House Avalon and the Alchemists’ Guild, commencing a round of negotiations.

‘We can’t let that continue, or our personal strength will soon cease to matter,’ Machaon reminded himself.

At the rate things were progressing, the Red-born's alliance would double in size within the next few months, quadruple by the end of the year, and expand to the rest of the planet before the decade was over.

Machaon and his fellow patriarchs would need much longer than that to complete the new spell, so it was imperative that they nipped the growing problem in the bud before it completely foiled all their plans.

But how could they prevent the lesser families from lusting over the genuine power that Percy promised them?

Well… Machaon, Theseus and Morpheus had already debated this topic and concluded that there was only one solution. Three Great Houses already stood against the Red-born, while only House Etna had openly joined him. But there were three more such families that had yet to pick a side.

That had to change – they had to convince the remaining Great Houses that Percy was more trouble than he was worth, and they had to do it before the boy's coalition grew too powerful to care.

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Phoebe walked along hills of freshly solidified stone, her crisp footsteps echoing across glistening sheets of obsidian. A couple of months ago, this place had been a flourishing grassland filled with life. Today, the transformed landscape was just a reminder of the cataclysmic battle that had been fought by figures approaching the pinnacle of the Colour realm.

She sighed.

The whole world probably thought of her as a monster. Neither Machaon nor Percy had bothered to keep their dealings with her secret, nor did they need to. It should be obvious to anyone with a functioning brain that the disgraced patriarch only drew breath because she had allowed it, and that the massive war that had engulfed the continent had been endorsed by her.

She had already made peace with that a long time ago, since none of this was new.

It was usually smaller families massacring one another over territory and petty grudges. The Great Houses rarely got directly involved, and the nobles never joined forces to form massive alliances with shared goals, but the mortals had murdered each other since before her rise to power.

She could have stopped it, of course, but she hadn't.

It was a necessary evil. It was easy to spew rhetoric about how strife and conflict allowed stronger mortals and bloodlines to emerge, but Phoebe had personally seen it happen time after time.

Nobles kidnapped and raped one another to create more powerful strains of their bloodlines. Their weakest descendants inevitably fell into the crucible of war sooner and more frequently, leaving the mightiest ones behind to pass their lineage on and strengthen their families with every generation. The progenitors of House Avalon had probably started the same way, producing one of Remior's most potent bloodlines and, eventually, Percy himself.

Phoebe was willing to let the continent drown in blood, and all the noble Houses crumble into dust if that was what it took to temper her favourite mortal into Remior's greatest champion. Her only fear was that Percy might die in the process, but that was a risk that she had accepted.

The young man was resourceful and hardworking enough to keep growing even if she left him alone, but it was debatable whether he would have achieved the things that he had without the added pressure.

Would he have managed to hold his own against Deimos if he hadn't spent months honing his skills against an army of bounty hunters? Would he have produced his Extreme spell if Hermes' son hadn't killed his familiar?

Would the Starry Queen have captured him if he hadn't fallen unconscious near the base of the Fungal Spire? Would he have possessed the means to shove the disembodied deity's soul inside a royal egg?

At the very least, Percy certainly wouldn't have obtained even half the rewards that he had earned during his most recent trips to Thess'kala, the Vault of Magic, and the void tournament if not for his fusion with Micky.

Perhaps, his efforts would have still yielded acceptable results in due time – in a couple of centuries or millennia – but it was clear to Phoebe that allowing the Great Houses to go after him was by far the fastest way to maximize his potential.

The most recent battle was further proof that her gamble was paying off.

Everyone else had focused on the outcome of the fight – or what it meant for the future. That Machaon had been injured. That Archibald had been forced to relocate his family to the Fungal Spire. That Percy was working tirelessly to expand his coalition. That the Great Houses were trying to figure out the rest of the boosting art.

Phoebe, on the other hand, was more concerned about something else.

Reaching her destination, she stopped at the edge of the enormous chasm that the two armies had carved into the ground with their domains. The sea of lava that Machaon's spells had created had cooled and solidified weeks ago, yet the grey ice beneath Phoebe's feet had yet to thaw completely. Reaching down, she picked up a crystalline shard small enough to fit in her grasp, noting how cold it still felt.

Others might not think much of it, but that was because they didn't understand the implications. They were shocked that Percy could hold his own against the patriarch of a Great House, yet Phoebe could clearly see that the source of the two mages' strength was fundamentally different.

Despite Percy's intricate spells and wide assortment of tricks, his mana was three grades lower than Machaon's. The grey ice also happened to be the result of affinity fusion between a rare and a composite element – an inherently unstable combination.

Regardless of Percy's strength, the crystalline patch shouldn't have persisted nearly this long. Phoebe had been surprised when the boy's mana had survived for multiple weeks after his battle with Deimos, yet the magical ice appeared to have lasted even longer this time.

Given Percy's recent growth, Phoebe no longer harboured any doubt that he would eventually grow into a paragon, and even a powerful deity. However, a piece of unstable Green mana remaining frozen for over a month was an indication of something else entirely: the boy's magic was beginning to passively impose itself upon the world, rejecting the very laws of existence.

The corner of her lips curled up slightly.

Chapter 739 – Fading signal

Finding himself drifting through the infinite darkness once more, Percy couldn't help but think that the lives of his clones were simpler than that of his main body. His copies still ended up in dangerous or unexpected situations quite often, but at least, they didn't have to juggle fifteen different responsibilities.

Even Micky remained uncharacteristically silent. After getting a taste of how busy his counterpart on Remior had lately been, the Huehuan appeared to have developed some newfound appreciation for the "boring" part of their interstellar adventures. Not that the previous decade of constant runecrafting had been more exciting than learning to control an army of magical sentries, but the promise of the artificial advancement had kept things moving.

As luck would have it, neither Percy nor Micky got the chance to bask in the rare period of peace and quiet for long, as they caught sight of Sol's blinking signal later that day.

'Of course this would happen the one time I didn't mind waiting,' the Huehuan complained.

Percy chuckled. 'Better this than getting side tracked again.'

Their time with Tiberius had arguably been quite fruitful, but Percy would rather not delay his reunion with the Melodians any longer.

Flying toward the source of the signal, Percy braced himself for the dense swarm of spectral fiends that certainly awaited him at his destination. The ethereal pests had been far easier to fend off after his promotions in the Thirsty Valley and the acquisition of the Blessing of Permanence. His artificial advancement should have further boosted the resilience of his wisp, so he wasn't too worried.

Unfortunately, his recent promotion appeared to have made his clones more enticing to the fiends, prompting dozens upon dozens of the tiny pests to attack him. Thankfully, their incorporeal claws and fangs struggled to cause any serious damage, but drilling through the blockade proved a little more troublesome than expected.

The Mimicry trait turned out quite handy, as it allowed Percy and Micky to freely shapeshift the wisp into various forms more suitable for driving the greedy creatures away.

Eventually, they managed to reach the surface of the planet.

Sol had already stopped broadcasting her signal and was currently in the process of mending her spectral injuries. Percy barely managed to worm his way into his friend's body just before her soul's rejection had a chance to kick in.

He and Micky were greeted by a wave of surprise.

'Would you look at that? He hasn't forgotten about us, after all,' a playful voice said.

'Your signals remained calm and periodic, so I assumed that there was no urgency,' Percy replied, perhaps a little too defensively.

'I've actually considered sending them out more frequently to catch your attention,' Sol admitted.

'Why?' Percy tensed up. 'Did anything happen?'

'Nothing too serious,' Sol said with a figurative shake of her head. 'That's ultimately why I hesitated. But I was starting to worry that something bad had happened on your end.'

Percy mentally sighed in relief. 'I'm really sorry about the long wait. It's been a busy decade. I'll tell you about some of it later, but why don't you fill me in on the situation on Melodia first?'

While flying towards Sol's body, he hadn't missed the fact that both of her cores had advanced to Green, making her the third strongest member of her species. Percy assumed that she was, since Doh and another Green-born should have reached Blue after the latter had received Latt's share of the Aurora Dew.

The woman's soul and soul mana bore the unmistakable flavour of the Blessing of Permanence. Linking himself to his host's senses, Percy failed to feel Zoris' ring on her fingers, suggesting that she had finished internalizing the blessing.

That was true of her first core, though the mana originating from her abdomen still sported a pristine silver colour and softer feel. Sol had clearly been careful not to let the concept into the second organ. It wouldn't have harmed her, but it wouldn't have benefitted her either, and there was no reason to grant the same blessing to both cores when there was a slim chance that more Rings of Sacrilege of her affinity might exist out there, in the cosmos.

'Where do I even begin?' Sol asked. 'I suppose I should mention that I have a couple of new traits now.'

'You don't sound too excited about that,' Percy noticed.

'I am,' the woman insisted. 'It's just… absorbing my third fiend was a hellish experience that still gives me nightmares. I even had to undergo the process twice, because I foolishly passed out during the first attempt. Zoris had warned me about it, but you know how precarious my people's situation is – or used to be. I couldn't afford to ignore a free source of power.'

Percy nodded, fully aware of what his friend had suffered through. Absorbing his own fourth fiend was the worst thing that he had ever experienced. If he fused with Nephthys and obtained a fifth slot one day, he wasn't sure that he could bring himself to take advantage of it.

'Which one did you get?' he asked, trying to pivot to a more pleasant topic.

'Multitasking,' Sol said, a faint hint of contentment finally bubbling up in her chest.

'That's the one you wanted as a teenager, isn't it?'

'It is,' the Melodian confirmed. 'I guess that there's always a silver lining. Then again, I was just a dumb kid back then. Beacon ended up being a million times better for me and my people.'

‘I’m flattered that you think that, but everything we achieved, we did together,’ Percy corrected her. Sol had bravely volunteered for that expedition to the Mirror Lake long before their reunion. While Percy had been the one to teach her Circulation, they had figured out the next part of the spell together. He certainly couldn’t have succeeded in so little time by himself. ‘What about your other trait?’

‘It’s called “Clarity”. It helps me filter out distracting thoughts, allowing me to focus on a given task,’ Sol explained.

Percy let out a whistle. He wasn’t sure how potent his friend’s new traits were, but they both sounded like they would help with what he had in mind for this trip. The best part about possessing Sol was that he would be able to borrow her spectral traits, just like his hosts could borrow his. Between the two of them, they had access to as many as seven – though it was debatable whether Beacon was of any use to them while he was already here.

There were a million other things that he and Sol had to catch up on, but he decided to pull up his Status before discussing any of that, curious to see what Phoebe’s Decree had to say about the borrowed traits.

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Sol (The Lone Wanderer’s clone)

Mana cores [2/2]:

Domain:

Blessing [1/2]:

Mutations:

Spectral traits [7/7]:

Mindsets [57%]:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Mental-type Decrees [4/5]:

Active-type Decrees [2/3]:

Core-type Decrees [2/2]:

Free-type Decrees:

Chapter 740 – Uplifting Melodia

Percy was admittedly a little envious of Sol's new traits. The descriptions were short and simple, but he could already feel their positive influence on his thoughts. His main body would certainly find them useful, though he struggled to decide which of his current traits he'd be willing to trade for them.

'I can't think like that,' he reminded himself.

There were so many different types of spectral fiends out there that Percy would never absorb them all, even if he converted all his cords into aspects. Hoping for specific traits was equally pointless. He should consider himself lucky if he never acquired a duplicate. That said, reading the descriptions of his host's abilities had made him reaffirm his willingness to absorb a fifth fiend one day, despite the horrific pain it would entail.

His future plans aside, the borrowed abilities would help him greatly during this trip. Keeping his connection to Remior in its empowered state was already effortless, because he was the only clone on a mission away from his home planet, so he wouldn't need Multitasking for that.

However, the trait would help Sol learn how to keep Circulation permanently active much faster than Percy's relatives. With any luck, it would also allow Percy and Micky to grant their host the Cradle, without affecting their ability to do other things.

Clarity wasn't immediately useful, since Percy doubted that he would struggle while fighting against the beasts besieging the Melodians' towns, but the trait would likely show its worth when they returned to the Elemental Source and trained near its magical waters – something that he was very much looking forward to.

'First things first,' he muttered through the connection. 'I should point out that I'm not travelling alone anymore. The details of how I ended up this way are a story for another time, but let me introduce you to Micky – my spectral companion and dearest friend.'

Percy didn't bother to reveal the existence of his fellow aspect to every single host, but he had no intention of keeping anything from Sol – somebody that he had a good relationship with and expected to interact with several times in the future. The woman's eyes widened, though she reined in her surprise soon enough.

She and the Huehuan exchanged pleasantries as Percy tuned them out to do something that he should have honestly done years ago. Activating Ludwick's Compass, he lit up a symbolic pyre right where his host stood, heaving a relieved sigh as soon as the mark was firmly in place.

He no longer had to rely on Sol's sporadic signals to return to this planet, though finding a Melodian at the verge of death might not always be possible, due to their low population. Still, possessing at least a Yellow beast within walking distance of the cities and communicating his identity to the sapients should be doable. As callous as the thought might sound, Percy was glad that he wouldn't lose access to the Mirror Lake, even if something bad were to happen to his friend.

With the first task out of the way, Percy took a few deep breaths to activate the Dance with both cores. His actions caused Sol – who was still chatting with Micky – to frown, though neither of them paid him much attention, clearly trusting him to do whatever he wanted. Once the boosting art was active, Percy took advantage of the spell and the two Green cores to push his domain to its absolute limit, locking it at its maximum intensity using Obatala's Approval.

He didn't receive a notification, because the domains his clones manifested while possessing others were limited to their temporary bodies and wouldn't follow them back to Remior. Still, Percy was

experienced enough to tell that his willpower had grown about as potent as a regular Blue's, and the updated entry inside his Status confirmed that.

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Domain:

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'Much better. Now, we'd probably not lose to Doh or the other Blue even in a contest of raw power.'

Mixing the simple domain with his Sage's Pond, he allowed his senses to expand outwards as far as possible. His range was far shorter than that of his main body, but his recently acquired mindset and Sol's new traits did help, allowing him to envelop anything within around four kilometres from her.

The Melodian city wasn't much larger than that. Percy estimated that the entire settlement was around nine kilometres across, based on the curvature of the section of the border that passed through his sensory bubble.

Everyone – including his host – appeared to live in small stone houses separated by narrow dirt paths. The city was much less developed than Twilight City, though it was larger than the average commoner town on Remior. That wasn't too strange. While Melodia was a more primitive planet than Percy's own, all of Sol's people were concentrated in just these few settlements.

Dark-skinned men and women with bright silver hair and pupilless eyes busily walked under the scorching rays of a yellow sun. Some of the strongest mages were currently in the midst of replacing the guards assigned along the perimeter, while a few units appeared to be patrolling the streets. Even the children and adults at the lower grades had their own role to play. The civilians who weren't studying or carrying out other jobs inside their homes were delivering supplies to the protectors stationed at the wall.

Just outside the settlement, Percy spotted barren fields that looked like they had been cultivated years ago, with the occasional broken rake or rusty shovel littering the dirt. He even saw a few ruined

buildings that he assumed to have been barns or farmhouses once, though it was clear that nobody had stepped foot inside those structures in a very long time.

'It's not safe for our civilians to venture out of the walls to herd animals or grow crops during the beast tides. We survive by eating the meat of the invading creatures,' Sol explained, interrupting her conversation with Micky after realizing that she had access to her own version of a Sage's Pond. 'This omnidirectional sense of yours… is it new?'

Percy rolled his borrowed eyes. 'What do you think? That I hid it from you while Rei and our other comrades were getting slaughtered?'

He'd said that a little more harshly than he'd meant to. Luckily, Sol didn't seem to have taken offense. 'Does it work underwater?'

'It does. Why?'

'Our three remaining towns are located along the perimeter of a lake – a mundane one, before you ask. We needed a source of drinking water, and it's too dangerous to venture outside often,' Sol said.

'Are you having trouble with aquatic beasts?' Percy asked.

'Not exactly.' The woman shook her head. 'After our strongest mages mastered the Dance, defending our borders stopped being an issue and our situation stabilized. The problem is that we're still not strong enough to expand our territory as we please, nor guard the lake properly. Lots of beasts come here to relieve their thirst. Even the hordes that don't attack us directly often slaughter each other inside the water, polluting it with blood and guts.'

'I see. And I'm guessing that your leaders are planning to form a joint perimeter around the lake to keep the beasts out and the water clean,' Percy deduced.

'I'm actually one of those leaders now!' Sol exclaimed with a smile, gesturing at a few pins and badges decorating her tight-fitting military uniform. 'Doh and Tonett – our other Blue – are in charge of the remaining towns. But your assumption is correct. In theory, we have enough powerful mages to station around the expanded perimeter. The issue lies with the initial expedition to cleanse the lake. We'll have

to defend the forming border from both sides, while simultaneously deploying enough people inside the water to locate and remove the remaining beasts.'

Percy could see how that was a problem, albeit a temporary and easily fixable one. Once the Melodians were certain that the interior of their new territory was secure, their watchers would be able to focus their attention outwards, lifting most of the strain on their manpower.

Afterwards, they should be able to continue expanding their cities along the new perimeter. They would have to defend the massive border anyway, so there was no reason to waste the free land along the lake's shores. Eventually, they might be able to join the three settlements into an even larger ring-shaped city, before continuing to grow it outwards.

In fact, there was a good chance that the beast tide would be over by then, allowing the Melodians to claim territory more easily and focus on their development. Percy had no idea how long these global calamities lasted, but this one had been plaguing Sol's people for well over a decade, so it had to be close to its conclusion.

Once the danger was over, the Melodians would have a long period of peace to build up their strength. The boosting art would ensure that they would never have to fear another beast tide after their population recovered, and Percy planned to help them accelerate their development in other ways.

'Sounds doable,' Percy said. 'I can lend you my strength and reconnaissance abilities to clear the lake. With that out of the way, I was hoping to spend a few weeks living with your people, studying those who have the same traits as me and sharing some of my knowledge. But there's something else that we're going to have to do before the beast tide is over.'

'What would that be?' Sol asked.

'Dealing with the wildlife on your planet won't be an issue in the long term, but other factions might discover Melodia one day. You'll need to grow much, much stronger to defend yourselves from hostile gods,' Percy explained.

The woman creased her brow. 'I understand that, but what does that have to do with the current beast tide?'

‘Well, you’ll need cleansing resources to reach the peak of the Colour realm. This time, I’ve brought enough Aurora Dew to last you and Doh until your second promotion, and your other Green-borns until their first, but I can’t supply elixirs to all your people forever. We’ll have a better chance finding you a stable source of beast mana before the creatures ravaging the continent drive themselves to extinction.’

‘What if there isn’t one? I recall you mentioning that only a minority of planets have a resource like that,’ Sol pointed out.

Percy shrugged. ‘We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. If there’s no native species suitable for your purposes, I’ll search for something that we can import during my travels. The bugs we have on my planet might work, but they need a special kind of environment to thrive, and I don’t know if you have anything like that here. Either way, we should spend some time exploring the rest of your world, and I wouldn’t mind combining that with another trip to the Mirror Lake.’

Sol bobbed her head to indicate her agreement. She was about to say something, but Percy remembered another issue. ‘By the way, where’s Zoris and Latt?’

The Melodian’s expression fell. ‘About that… It’s something we’ll have to deal with before anything else. Last time I checked, Latt was living safely in Doh’s city, but the ring… Tonett has it. It was taken from us.’