Wanderer 741

Chapter 741 – Uneventful trip

Percy's gaze narrowed. 'What do you mean "taken from you"?'

Sol sighed. 'It's complicated. We tried our best to hide the ring – Zoris taught us how to conceal the traces of the blessing from our mana, and we avoided showing our new traits in public as much as possible. The problem was that we couldn't ignore our abilities entirely. The whole point of acquiring them had been to use them for the benefit of our people.

'Our community is small and the three of us who had survived the expedition were at the centre of everyone's attention. As you'd imagine, our people also happen to be quite experienced at recognizing when another person is under the influence of a trait. Eventually, others noticed things that couldn't be explained by our publicly-known skillsets and started asking difficult questions. I blamed everything related to the blessing on my Beacon trait and you – the otherworldly visitor who had already helped us so much – but the other Green-borns aren't fools. They realized that the three of us had manifested our new abilities one person at a time, years after bidding you farewell or returning from the Mirror Lake.'

'So what?!' Percy asked, unable to keep a hint of anger from spilling into his voice. 'Did those ungrateful pricks just forget about everything that we've done for them and steal the ring by force?'

'Not exactly,' his host said, hurriedly shaking her head. 'There was no violence or coercion involved. Everyone respects us greatly for bringing the Dance back and saving our cities from the verge of collapse. We've been hailed as heroes, hence our leadership positions. But the other Green-borns did apply a lot of soft pressure to get us to share the blessing with them, arguing that the survival of our civilization was on the line and that we shouldn't have withheld such an important advantage from them. We explained that the ring didn't belong to us and that it contained the sentient remnant of an ancient deity. We turned their requests down for as long as we could, though Zoris eventually agreed to pass the concept to just the Green-borns, to get them off our backs.'

Percy grimaced, realizing that the situation was a lot messier than he'd initially expected. He didn't blame the Melodians for being desperate to build their strength up in any way they could, but them discovering the ring and passing it around like a mindless tool was precisely the outcome that Zoris had spent millennia trying to avoid.

Reduced to the immobile form of a tiny artifact, the former deity lacked the power to escape from the grasp of even the weakest mortal. He had generously agreed to grant his blessing to the survivors of the expedition, but the number of recipients had already swelled by a factor of ten, and Percy doubted that this would be the end.

Would the Green-borns even be willing to let go of the ring a few decades from now, when they were done spreading the concept among their ranks? Or would they suddenly decide that they also wanted Zoris to help their relatives and Yellow-borns out?

'This stops now,' Percy declared, leaving no room for debate. 'I'm all for helping your people, but not at Zoris' expense. The elixirs and spells that I'm giving you are plenty.'

'Of course.' Sol nodded. 'This was our consensus with Zoris as well. He just wanted to buy time until your return.'

Percy simultaneously felt honoured that the disembodied god had placed such trust in him, and guilty that he'd taken so long to come back.

The good news was that retrieving the ring shouldn't be too difficult. The Melodians couldn't exactly leave their planet or leak the ring's existence to the rest of the universe even if they wanted to, nor could they advance in the next century without Percy's elixirs. Sol had probably taught them how to cleanse their cores without beast mana, but they would never be able to keep up with his own rate of progression.

Dealing with a few greedy Yellows and Greens was well within his power. Even if it hadn't been, he could have just returned after another promotion or two, when nobody on the barren world would be able to stop him. His main body's advancements didn't directly strengthen his clones much, but they were usually accompanied by lots of smaller discoveries and upgrades such as Micky's Shapeshifting Sentries spell or access to more potent phantom mana.

Getting the artifact back without spilling blood was the only tricky bit. Percy wasn't above executing an arrogant Green-born if necessary – it wouldn't even be the first Holy Child to get in his way – but he'd rather not weaken the natives further when their civilization was at such a critical state, nor sour his relationship with a faction that he was planning to cultivate into future allies.

Melodia was uniquely suited for that purpose. While Duwa's people would also make for excellent allies and trade partners, they already had a developed planet with its own gods and titans at the helm. Meanwhile, Sol's world was akin to soft clay that Percy could potentially shape however he wanted.

'Lead the way. I want to meet this Tonett – who thinks he can drink my elixirs and still demand whatever else he wants from me afterwards.'

Sol chuckled. 'Tonett's a woman. She also happens to be Latt's great-grandaunt and a three-hundred-year-old mage who has led our people through some of our darkest times. You have every right to be pissed off, but please try not to be too heavy handed with her. She's not a bad person – just a little stubborn.'

Percy rubbed the bridge of his borrowed nose, already feeling the incoming headache.

Before Sol had the chance to exit her house, he instructed her to always keep the Dance active from now on, and Micky to start drawing seals inside her first core, explaining his intention to grant her a pair of artificial advancements.

He'd been planning to do it anyway, but he now had another reason to ensure that Sol remained more powerful than the rest of her people. Percy would rather deal with somebody he trusted, and getting both of her cores to Violet would go a long way toward that goal.

After confirming that the Multitasking trait allowed his spectral companions to focus on their assigned tasks while still being able to do other things, he unfolded his sensory domain outwards once again, scanning the surrounding neighbourhoods. Reaching Tonett's city would take a while, so Percy figured that he might as well take advantage of the trip to study how the Melodians lived.

The buildings were prettier than he'd realized earlier. There was no developed branch of runecrafting on Melodia, so their houses were small and constructed purely out of mundane materials, but their foundations were firm and set in a thick layer of stone buried several metres below the surface, while their walls and pillars were carefully arranged to balance internal space with stability.

The exterior of the buildings was decorated with intricate engravings that depicted Melodians fighting against beasts of all shapes and sizes. Percy wasn't surprised by that, as it was the main activity that had defined most of the natives' history, as well as a way to honour their fallen heroes. Perhaps Rei's figure

was also carved somewhere in this town, but Percy couldn't recognize any individuals from the engravings.

Something similar was true of the Melodians' clothes. This wasn't Percy's first time on their planet, but he hadn't possessed his Sage's Pond during his previous trips, so he'd never registered how well the natives' fabric was woven or how its very texture was adorned with microscopic letters that a lower-graded mage would have struggled to make out without squinting.

Carefully examining the text, Percy realized that it listed hundreds of names of presumably-dead Melodians. Studying those on his host's uniform carefully, he spotted a few that he recognized. Mi – Sol's father – was among them, as was Rei, Sik, and dozens of others that Percy remembered from the expedition.

'Their culture is actually a lot more advanced than you'd expect – given the small size of their cities and the fact that they've been fighting for their lives,' Micky said.

Percy mentally nodded. It was especially notable if he considered that these people didn't even possess any affinities that could be used for construction. If somebody had told Percy about Melodia without him ever visiting, he would have pictured a bunch of primitive villages and people using simple tools of stone and bone, not unlike those he had seen in the barren world with the floating cats.

'It must be because of their spectral traits. They have tens of thousands of people with supernatural talents that allow them to specialize in all sorts of crafts.'

Even though the peak factions had thousands of times as many people and were also aware of the existence of spectral fiends, Percy wasn't sure that there was any other place in the universe with so many soul affinity users gathered together.

It wasn't just their clothes and structures either. Percy spotted teenagers playing musical instruments with the skill of seasoned experts, artists painting portraits that looked more realistic than life itself, and potters shaping clay into dishes and cups so beautifully crafted that Percy would never dare to stain them with food.

A proud smile crept up on his host's lips as she caught him gawking at the handiwork of her kinsmen, though she remained quiet, allowing him to watch to his heart's content.

Sol didn't head toward the wall immediately. Being the responsible leader that the once-immature girl had grown into, she first sought out her subordinates to alert them about her absence. The dozen-or-so Green-borns under her command weren't pleased about their leader leaving the city in person, but she refused their offers to accompany her, insisting that she would be safe enough and move much faster on her own.

Only once the woman had arranged for the city to continue functioning without her did she exit through the northeastern gate, running along the lake's shore toward the neighbouring settlement.

Percy and Sol got attacked by a few packs of Orange and Yellow beasts on the way, yet the Melodian slaughtered them easily with a few slashes from her spectral sickles. Percy knew that his host would have been fine even without him, but spotting the approaching creatures from hundreds of metres away and predicting their every move through her Sage's Pond had further trivialized the journey.

It had been around midday when Percy had first entered his host's body, and the bright yellow sun had yet to set by the time they reached the next city. The guards bowed their heads politely at their heroine's arrival, letting her pass without issue and giving Percy hope that he might be able to retrieve Zoris' ring peacefully, after all.

Sadly, his optimism only lasted until he saw the hulking beast of a woman that his host introduced as Tonett.

Chapter 742 – Tonett

Tonett greeted Sol outside a large building by the centre of the city, accompanied by a couple of Yellow attendants. Percy guessed that it was some kind of mayoral office, though he couldn't help but wonder why Sol didn't have one if she was also a city leader. Or maybe she did, and she just preferred sending out her signals from within the privacy of her home.

In any case, the Green-born didn't bother inviting Sol inside to have a seat. Either the very concept of hospitality went over the brutish woman's head entirely, or the younger mage had done something to annoy her. Percy guessed that it was a little bit of both.

Tonett was taller and burlier than most male Melodians that Percy had seen, standing a full head above his host. She wore a similar uniform to Sol's – only with even more badges and decorative pins, which

Tonett had undoubtedly accumulated over centuries of service. Her shirt was a few sizes too small, the buttons looking like they were about to pop as the bottom edge of the overstretched fabric stopped above her navel, revealing a bulging set of abs.

The soul affinity typically wasn't very compatible with physical combat – not unless fused to another element to gain substance – but the Green-born woman had obviously been strong enough to pummel Red and Orange beasts to death with her bare fists even before her promotion. Judging from the many scars marring her obsidian knuckles, she had slaughtered countless weaker creatures in her long life, and Percy wouldn't be surprised if she had graduated to Yellow beasts after reaching Blue.

'She has the Brawling trait, making her supernaturally gifted in all forms of hand-to-hand combat,' Sol explained through their connection. 'It's not too useful when it comes to dangerous beasts, but you'd be surprised by how much mana it can save her when surrounded by a pack of smaller creatures.'

Percy nodded, recalling how seriously these people took their traits. Even those who ended up with useless abilities made it their life's mission to take advantage of their gift.

'Brawling might be a good match for me or Archibald,' Micky speculated.

'I think you'll be better off with a proper weapon once we figure out how to make you one,' Percy disagreed. 'But you're not wrong about Grandpa – this trait might synergize well with his clones. Unfortunately, he'll only have one shot at getting it in the near future, since I'd rather wait a few years before asking Zoris to give anyone else the blessing.'

Oblivious to the soundless conversation taking place inside Sol's head, Tonett regarded the younger woman sternly. The Blue's furrowed eyebrows, coupled with her shaved scalp gave her a rather intimidating appearance.

"Sol. How many times do I need to tell you not to travel between cities on your own? You have envoys to send or guards to accompany you for that. I know you're strong enough to handle the wildlife with ease on most days, but your life is too important to be taking unnecessary risks."

"I'm not on my own, and this was urgent," Percy's host replied.

“Is your fiend buddy back?” the larger woman asked, putting two and two together.

‘Not this again!’ Percy grimaced inwards, struggling to keep himself from swearing.

“He’s here,” Sol confirmed. “I think that you should start by giving him the ring back and apologizing for taking it.”

A humourless smile formed on Tonett’s lips as she rubbed the grey ring on her clenched right hand with her left. Even now, she had her boosting art active, constantly circulating augmented mana through her core. At least she wasn’t wasting everyone’s time – Percy had to give her that.

“That won’t be possible,” she said. “You know how important the blessing is for us. We have dozens of children falling sick every day. My next trait might help us cleanse the lake a moment sooner.”

“It’s not like Percy was planning to grab the ring and abandon us!” Sol protested. “He’s brought elixirs for the rest of our Green-borns. An extra forty Blues will help us a lot more than a single Blue acquiring another spectral trait or two!”

“Of course,” Tonett admitted, before shaking her head. “Unfortunately, our Greens will need a couple of years to take advantage of the resources. Our cities will suffer irreparable damage by then. We’ll have to attempt the mission a lot sooner, even if my new trait proves useless.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Percy interjected. He’d been this close to exploding at the Blue, but the mention of sick children had caused him to deflate. “I have other ways to help you take the lake immediately.”

Tonett raised an eyebrow, probably realizing who had spoken. “Percy, was it? Let me start by thanking you for everything that you have done for our people. I understand that none of us would be alive today if not for you. I’m sorry that we took your ring without involving you in the decision, but you weren’t here, and I cannot return it at this moment.”

Percy didn’t appreciate the woman’s response one bit. Forcing himself to remain calm, he tried to exhaust every civilized option before doing anything that he might regret. “Why not?”

“Because I’ll die if I do. If what you said about the lake and the elixirs is true, I’ll be happy to return the artifact as soon as I’m done with it, even though most of our Green-borns haven’t had a chance to use it yet. The problem is that I’ve already absorbed my second trait, so I need to finish internalizing the blessing.”

Percy was tempted to tell her that this wasn’t his problem. He could empathize with her eagerness to acquire a new trait, but she should have waited for the blessing to become permanent before absorbing a fiend, just like Percy himself had done. Fortunately for the foolish woman, he wasn’t cruel enough to demand her death.

“How much longer?” he asked.

“A few months.”

Percy frowned. The timeframe was acceptable, since he was planning to stay on Melodia longer than that. The issue was that he didn’t trust the Green-born not to hide the ring or try to cheat him in some other way.

“Well… Tonett… I hope you enjoy Sol’s company, because you aren’t leaving my sight while that ring is on your finger. I’ll also need your Green-borns to sign a spectral contract before they get their hands on my elixirs. I was originally planning to give you the resources for free, but it looks like gratitude and mutual respect won’t be enough for a smooth collaboration.”

The Blue’s features contorted in anger. “A little rude, don’t you think?! The ring was discovered by our expedition, on our planet. I won’t deny that you were an extremely important member of that expedition, but letting you keep the ring after we’re done with it is gratitude enough. And let’s not pretend that you’re getting nothing else out of this.”

Percy snorted. “First of all, the ring doesn’t belong to anybody. There’s a god inside it – over a thousand times older than both of us combined. Zoris only ever offered to stick by my side until I figure out a way to give him a new body – he doesn’t want to be passed along from one greedy finger to another. Secondly, you’re right that I’m also benefitting from your people, but my terms are more than reasonable. If you don’t think so, just put it to a vote. I bet that most of your Green-borns will jump at the opportunities that I’m offering you.”

“Most of our Green-borns aren’t Blues, nor city lords,” Tonett insisted, a vein throbbing on her forehead. “This isn’t their call.”

Percy couldn’t help but scoff at the woman’s shamelessness. She actually had the gall to use the higher grade and status that she had only obtained because of his elixirs to win the argument.

“No, but Sol and Doh are, so you’re outnumbered by your peers as well,” he corrected her, not willing to back down. “Now, do you want to keep butting horns with me to preserve your dumb pride, or do you actually give a shit that your people don’t have clean drinking water?”

The stubborn woman clenched her fists until they released faint popping sounds. She tried to pressure Sol and him with her domain, but Percy had seen the go-to move of every arrogant Blue in the universe coming from a kilometre away, blocking Tonett’s willpower with a wave of his own.

With the dispute on the verge of devolving to violence, Percy would have expected the Green-born’s attendants to take their leader’s side. Instead, the poor Yellows awkwardly took a few steps back, clearly unwilling to get involved in a disagreement between city lords.

Tonett spent a couple of minutes glaring at Percy, trying to get him to water down some of his harshest terms, before eventually realizing that it wasn’t going to happen.

“Fine. Have it your way.” Clicking her tongue, the Blue shot her cowardly subordinates an admonishing glance. “Pitch. Timbre. Send word to Doh’s city, telling him that Sol’s fiend is going to help us clear the lake out. Ask him to have his strongest mages rest well within the next couple of days, and prepare as much manpower as he can spare by the third.”

Turning back to Sol, she gave her and Percy a complicated look. “I hope that you can deliver on your promise, and that offering to help with the lake wasn’t just a cheap bargaining tactic. If we fail to eliminate the creatures hiding in the water and our mages end up flanked from both sides of the barrier, we’ll have much bigger problems to worry about than polluted water.”

Chapter 743 – Ready

Percy hadn’t offered his assistance lightly.

He was fully aware that botching the mission to claim the lake would leave Sol's people in a worse state than if they did nothing. The polluted water would kill a lot of lowborn by the end of the beast tide, but that was infinitely better than getting their entire military force wiped out.

Over the following three days, Percy discussed the details of the operation with his host, Tonett, and Doh – who arrived at the burly woman's city a few hours after Sol.

Apparently, there used to be a fourth settlement along the perimeter of the lake. It had collapsed during the years leading up to the Melodians' expedition to the Elemental Source. The city's destruction had actually been the catalyst that had prompted the Green-borns to send hundreds of able-bodied men and women to what had essentially been a suicide mission.

After over a decade of war, their population was down to ninety thousand members – half of what it had been before the start of the beast tide. They had originally been led by a council of over sixty Green-borns, though even their upper echelons hadn't made it this far without suffering severe casualties.

Mastering the Dance had made deaths much scarcer, essentially locking the Melodian fighting force at thirty-nine Green-borns, ten thousand Yellow-borns, and twenty-six thousand Orange-borns that they had today.

"How many mages does it take to guard the cities?" Percy asked.

"Stationing around six hundred Yellows and eighteen hundred Oranges along a city's borders is enough for them to spot and overwhelm most incoming hordes without letting the beasts touch anybody," Doh explained. "That might not sound like a lot of people, but keep in mind that we have to multiply that number by three cities and three shifts to keep everyone adequately rested. Over sixty percent of our manpower is spent on defence."

Percy nodded, starting to see why the Melodians had kept losing people before acquiring the boosting art. Even with double their current population, securing four cities would have been difficult if everyone was effectively a grade weaker. Thankfully, their forces weren't stretched nearly as thin nowadays.

The problem was that the lake was much larger than the cities.

Studying a regional map through Sol's eyes, Percy calculated how many mages they would need during and after the upcoming mission. His host's people currently guarded a combined perimeter of around eighty kilometres, while the lake was over five times wider than each of their cities, its circumference nearing a hundred and sixty kilometres.

Even after building the new wall and securing its interior, preventing any creatures from invading would put a strain on the Melodians' manpower. Stretching their shifts a little longer and overworking themselves for a couple of years until the beast tide ended should be doable, but providing the force necessary for the initial operation would be a challenge.

"If it's a one-time thing, we can ask our soldiers to stay on guard duty for a few days in a row, without taking many breaks," Tonett said. "It's a tough ask, but it'll give us twice or thrice the number of mages to push into the wilderness and search the lake with."

"How long will it take to complete the new wall?" Percy asked.

"A couple of months," Doh said, causing everyone's expressions to droop.

Percy and the three city lords were currently convening within a large meeting room, along with nine other Green-borns. The remaining twenty-eight strongest Melodians were back at their cities, managing their defences and preparing their forces for the mission.

"That's how long we'll need to implement the full version, but we can make do with a simplified prototype," Sol explained, unfolding a large piece of parchment that contained schematics for the wall's cross-section.

Percy recognized the shape of the structure, since it was pretty much identical to the barrier that currently protected the three cities. It was over twenty metres tall and four metres thick, giving the guards a good vantage point to watch over the surrounding areas, as well as ample room for multiple people to walk side by side or transport supplies atop the structure.

As a bonus, the thick stony barrier would probably resist a couple of blows from a Green beast, but even a pack of Yellow creatures would obviously break through or climb over it pretty fast if there was no mage to defend it.

“We’ve modified the blueprint so that the wall can be built in ten separate steps,” Doh added, pointing at certain markers spaced out by two metres along the height of the structure. “Each layer will add to the wall’s toughness and allow our guards to see farther away, but we can take our sweet time implementing the extra sections after the operation. The priority is to build the base of the structure to discourage beasts from crossing it and give our mages an advantage.”

Percy sighed. Five days was a long time to go without sleep, but he understood that this was the best these people could do without elemental affinities. Building even the foundational layer of the massive structure in under a week would only be possible because many of their builders likely possessed the right spectral traits for the job. However, Percy expected everyone to contribute – even children too weak to fight or stack the heavy materials up would likely help by bringing food and water to the workers.

The wall was going to be built by six large groups working concurrently. The plan was to have a pair of teams set out from each city, heading in opposite directions and meeting at the middle of the span separating their settlements. The only caveat was that the armies moving south of Sol and Doh’s cities would have to travel twice as far as every other group, since they would also have to pave over the territory that had originally belonged to the destroyed settlement.

Percy guessed that the leaders would allocate a greater number of soldiers and workers to those groups to make up for that, though he didn’t care too much about the logistics of the wall’s construction. His job was to ensure that a seventh, independent force would eradicate every creature hiding within the lake’s waters by the time the other six groups were done forming the perimeter.

“How many mages can you spare for me?” he asked once the Green-borns were happy with their plans for the wall.

“How many do you need?” Doh asked back.

Percy had been pondering over this very issue for the past couple of days, so he had an answer ready at his borrowed lips. “Ten Greens and five hundred Yellows should suffice.”

Tonett raised an eyebrow as the Greens muttered among themselves. “Are you sure that’s enough? The lake is vast, deep, and full of creatures that are great at camouflage.”

Percy nodded. Reaching out to his main body, he explained what the situation on Melodia was like, and what he was trying to do.

The reason the Melodians typically had to deploy thousands of mages to protect their cities was because they didn't know which way the raids would come from, so they needed to constantly have a large force protecting every centimetre of their borders.

Beasts usually attacked in packs of dozens or hundreds of Orange and Yellow creatures, which was a negligible force in the grand scheme of things. Unfortunately, the guards couldn't afford to leave any section of the wall unprotected, as the beasts would deal a lot of damage to the structure itself, invade the cities and massacre countless people by the time reinforcements arrived.

Percy was tasked with scouring an even greater area, yet the main challenge was in locating his targets. Once he knew where the aquatic beasts were hiding, he should be able to direct his smaller team of elites to eliminate them. His priorities were speed and efficiency. He had to ensure that no beasts blindsided the people working at the wall, and to do so without taking up too much manpower that could be spent elsewhere.

A couple of minutes later, under the Green-borns' stunned gazes, a river of grey liquid gushed out of his wisp, flowing down Sol's body and pooling by her feet. The soul-freezing water squirmed as if it were alive – because it very much was – before transforming into fifty fist-sized rats.

Half of the rodents remained perfectly still, the rest shooting towards the lake and spreading out evenly. The magical constructs phased through the walls of the meeting room like they didn't exist, disappearing from everyone's sight except Percy's, Sol's, and Micky's. A few minutes later, the remaining critters started moving, traveling even farther out before stopping.

Less than an hour later, all of Percy's sentries were hiding somewhere inside the lake, having disguised themselves as unassuming pebbles that had sunk to the bottom. An intelligent enemy might see through the imperfect illusion, but Percy doubted that the dumb creatures swimming through the murky water would realize that they were being spied upon.

The main body had only lent him half of Micky's spiritual blood. It was more than he could control at once anyway, even though Sol's Multitasking and Clarity traits allowed him to handle way more sentries than the original. Since the clone would have to rotate through the constructs, he saw no reason to rob the original Huehuan of all his training tools.

Unfortunately, even with fifty sensory domains spread out as much as possible, Percy had only covered about a quarter of the lake. The fact that he could only focus on a quarter of that at any given time would make his job even tougher. That said, if he used the magical puppets strategically, he should be able to gather all the information that his subordinates would need to eliminate their targets.

“Alright. I’m ready when you are,” he told the Melodians, all of whom were still looking at him dumbfounded.